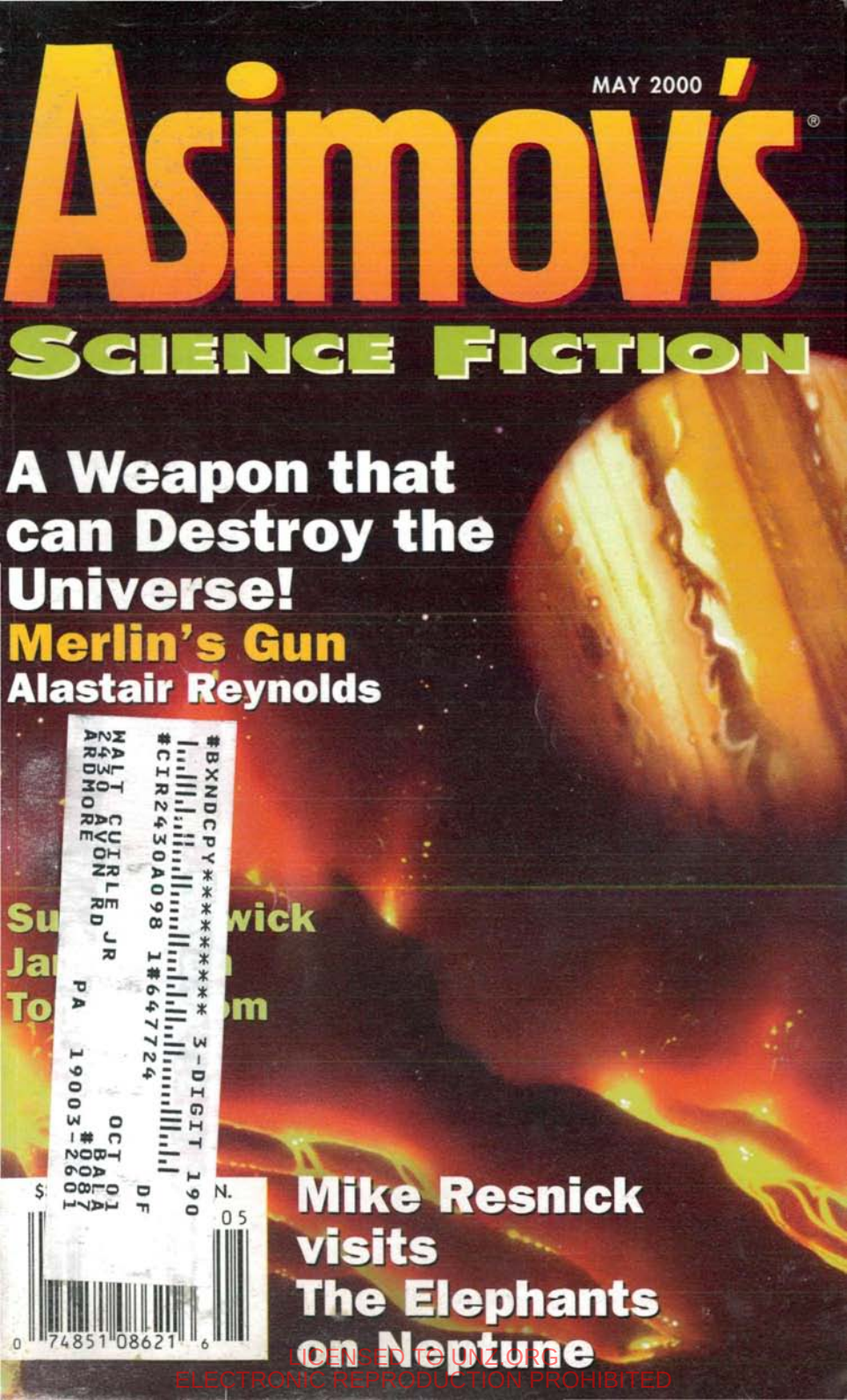

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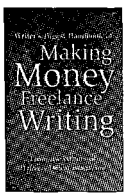

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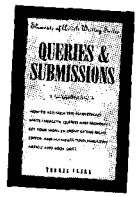

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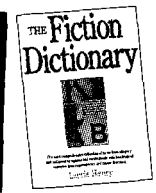

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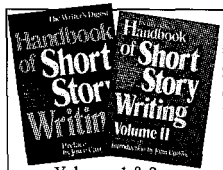

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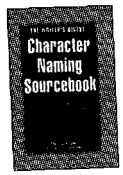

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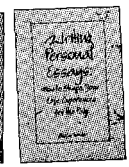

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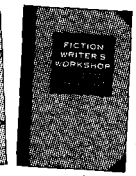

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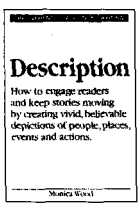
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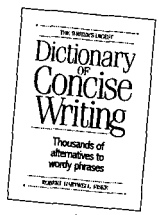

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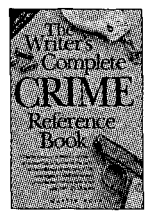

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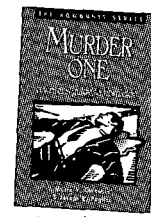

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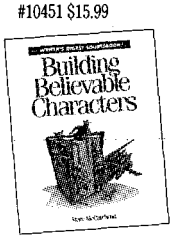

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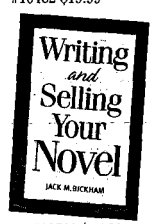

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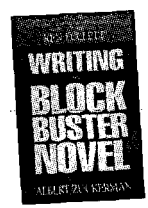

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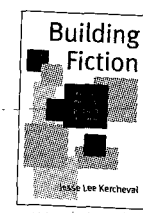

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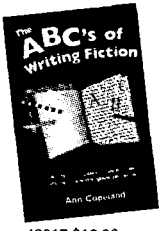

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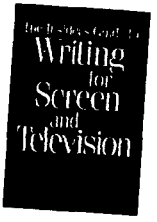

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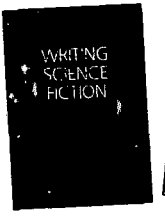

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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

THE VIEW THROUGH SLOW GLASS

What may be the finest award-losing science fiction story ever written is Bob Shaw's "The Light of Other Days," which was first published in *Analog Science Fiction* in 1966 and which has appeared in a multitude of anthologies since then. It's the story that gave the "slow glass" concept to the world, one of the most ingenious science fictional inventions that anyone has ever dreamed up. Everyone who has read the story assumes, quite reasonably, that it was a Hugo and Nebula winner—a book publisher once said so right on the front cover of a Shaw book—but that wasn't in fact the case. Larry Niven's "Neutron Star" took the Hugo that year, and Richard McKenna's "The Secret Place" won the Nebula.

Nobody remembers the McKenna story today. It's a minor piece, and its Nebula victory was probably a sentimental aftereffect of the well-liked author's sudden death a little over a year before its publication. The Niven, though entertaining, is a long way from being the finest of its author's stories, and has been reprinted only a handful of times over the years. But slow glass is one of those ideas that stays in a reader's mind forever, and that single short story made its author famous. To this day there are those—plenty of them—who are absolutely convinced that it won the Hugo. They can even remember seeing Bob Shaw coming proudly up to the dais to collect his trophy at the 1967 SF convention in New York City. (I once heard someone say just that.) But it *didn't* win. It became a classic story, but it won no awards. (Which would *you* prefer, if you were a science fiction writer?)

Shaw's marvelous story is built around two interlocking narrative cores: a troubled marriage and a technological marvel. The marvel is slow glass—a substance so opaque that it greatly hinders the passage of photons through it, to the point where it can take ten years for a beam of light to travel the width of a single pane. The marriage is tense because an unwanted pregnancy has brought financial and emotional strains into it. Shaw's handling of each of these cores is distinctive and elegant, and he shows an especially fine touch in depicting the human problems of his story; but the concept of slow glass is what makes the story particularly memorable as science fiction. It's the sort of startlingly original idea that comes once or twice a lifetime, at best, to an SF writer.

Ask anyone who's involved in any way with science fiction to tell you what the speed of light is, and you'll probably be told at once that it's about 186,000 miles per second. The more fastidious ones may give you the number in kilometers per second. The people who would rather read fantasy trilogies might tell you that it's 186,000 miles an hour, which sounds almost right, though it isn't. But what hardly anyone will remember to add is the small but significant qualification that what they are giving is the speed of light *in a vacuum*. Light passing through any other medium will move less quickly. The speed of light slows as it travels through the atmosphere,

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and slows even more as it passes through water. The slowing effect is greater still for light going through glass—what we see through a window gets to us an imperceptible moment later than it would if there were no windowpane in the way.

Bob Shaw's wonderful idea was to postulate the existence of a kind of glass that slows the velocity of light in an extreme way, by forcing photons to travel "through a spiral tunnel coiled outside the radius of capture of each atom in the glass." He doesn't offer further technical explanations—how could he?—but in any case Shaw's concern is with effects, not causes. The effect of the passage of light through slow glass is to delay its transit by months or even years. A window made of slow glass becomes a window into the lost and irretrievable past. Looking through slow glass, we see the light of other days; we are able to see the scenes and peoples of vanished yesterdays. It is a tremendously poignant and evocative concept, and Shaw wrings great emotional power from it in the course of telling us a story about love and the loss of love that comes with time.

The hard truth is that slow glass is very likely a concept that can exist only as a science fictional speculation. Impurities in the glass, or random movements of subatomic particles, would probably deflect and scatter the image long before it had completed its slow journey through the pane. That matters not at all in terms of science fiction; so far as we know, time machines are impossible too, and so are handy little gadgets that give us access to parallel worlds, but plenty of fine stories have been based on those ideas all the same. Internal conceptual consistency is the key factor; what we are writing, after all, is stories, fantastic ones at that, not patent applications.

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Some recent scientific news, though, has brought Bob Shaw's slow glass to my mind, at least in a tangential way. This is the report a few months back that three researchers working at Harvard University and the Rowland Institute for Science in Cambridge, Massachusetts, have managed to slow a beam of laser light to the extraordinary velocity of 38 miles an hour. Any reasonably capable bicyclist—Joe Haldeman in his prime, say—should be able to hit a better pace than that. (Joe, of course, is a few years past his prime, now, and perhaps no longer can manage to get the old Schwinn racer up to faster-than-light speeds. Well, it happens to the best of us. I notice that he still moves very quickly when he comes up to collect his annual Hugos and Nebulas, though.)

The Cambridge experiments, conducted by a Danish physicist, Dr. Lene Vestergaard Hau, working with two Harvard graduate students and Dr. Steve E. Harris of Stanford University, involved bombarding a cluster of vaporized sodium atoms with laser beams, causing them to lose energy and slow down, i.e., to grow cooler. In a series of complex processes taking just thirty-eight seconds the experimenters were left with a cluster of atoms cooled to a temperature just fifty billionths of a degree above absolute zero, which is very chilly indeed, as cold as anything in the universe can get: minus 459.67 degrees Fahrenheit. At that sub-Minnesota temperature the remaining sodium atoms expand greatly and merge into something called a "Bose-Einstein condensate," a kind of high-density atomic soup that is no longer a vapor, but now is as solid as a block of lead. When a laser beam is fired through the condensate, very little of it is able to pass through. The photons that do manage to make the trip are slowed to a crawl—one twenty-millionth of the speed of light in a vacuum.

Further work is under way now to bring the speed of light through the condensate down to as little as 120 feet per hour: tortoise velocity. "We're getting the speed of light so low we can almost send a beam into the system, go for a cup of coffee, and return in time to see the light come out," Dr. Hau told the New York *Times*.

The important thing here is not that the Hau group's experiments have found a way of reducing the speed of light. As noted above, light is slowed whenever it passes through any transparent medium, be it air, water, vodka, or a windowpane, whether or not the pane is made of Bob Shaw's slow glass. The Cambridge experiments cause light to travel very much more slowly than it does in air or water or vodka, yes, but we are still not in slow-glass territory. (Bear in mind that if a beam of light needs ten years to pass through a pane of slow glass half an inch thick, it's loitering along at a velocity of five inches a century, which is a whole lot slower than 120 feet an hour.) So we are not very likely to see the Bob Shaw story make the transit to real life as a direct consequence of this new discovery.

But other wonders are possible. For one thing, the Hau group's apparatus does not transfer heat energy to the chilled medium through which the laser beam travels. This makes it plausible that the concept might be employed in optical computers, that is, computers that function using photons instead of electrons as their operating medium. It could be possible to devise optical switching systems in which a single photon turns a system on or off, thus leading to the construction of ultra-miniaturized superfast computers.

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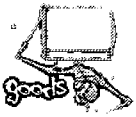

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stein condensate has an extraordinarily high refractive index: roughly one hundred trillion times that of a glass optical fiber. (The refractive index is a measure of the degree to which light is bent as it passes through a medium.) This could be applied in the design of ultrasensitive night-vision glasses and in creating very bright laser-light projectors.) And doubtless other applications will present themselves as the research continues.

Bob Shaw died a few years ago, still a relatively young man. He never did win a Hugo or a Nebula for any of his science fiction, good though it was, though his fellow Britons honored him with both the British Fantasy Award and the British Science Fiction Association Award for his 1985 novel *The Ragged Astronauts;* the BSFA gave him its 1975 award also for his book *Orbitsville.* Whether he was bitter about the failure of "The Light of Other Days" to win awards is something I don't know, but I tend to doubt it: writing a story that good is its own reward, and I suspect Shaw came to realize, as time went along and his splendid story made its way from one anthology of classics to another, that it's far preferable to have written an unforgettable masterpiece that didn't win an award than it is to receive a trophy and a quick moment of applause for a story that nobody remembers a year later.

And—though we are no closer to the invention of slow glass than we were when the Shaw story first appeared almost thirty-five years ago—I think that Bob Shaw would have felt a chill run down his spine as his eye came across the phrase "slow light" in the newspaper stories announcing the Hau group's experiments with laser beams and cooled atoms. I certainly did. ❍

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Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

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GOING AFTER BOBO

Susan Palwick is an assistant professor of English at the University of Nevada, Reno. From their bedroom window, she and her husband can see Peavine Mountain as well as a panoramic view of the endless new subdivisions. At night they often hear coyotes. This story is dedicated to their cat Grendel, who went exploring one day last summer and never came back. Ms. Palwick's first novel, *Flying in Place* (Tor, 1992), won the Crawford Award. She is currently working on revisions for her second book, *Shelter*, which is also under contract to Tor. Her short fiction has appeared in *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and the anthologies *Not of Woman Born*, *The Horns of Elfland*, *Xanadu 3*, and *Starlight*.

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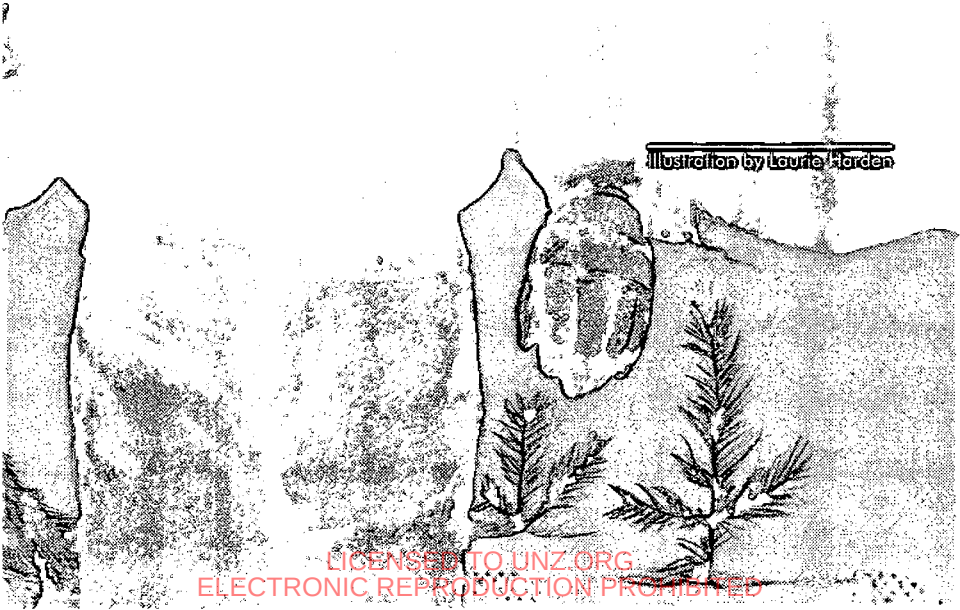

Illustration by Laurie Harden

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I was the only one home when the GPS satellites finally came back online. It was already dark out by then, and it had been snowing all afternoon. I'd been sitting at the kitchen table with my algebra book, trying to concentrate on quadratic equations, and then the handheld beeped and lit up and the transmitter signal started blipping on the screen, and I looked at it and cursed and ran upstairs to double-check the signal position against my topo map. And then I cursed some more, and started throwing on warm clothing.

I'd spent five days staring at my handheld, praying that the screen would light up again, please, please, so I'd be able to see where Bobo was. The only time he'd even stayed away from home overnight, and it was when the satellites were out. Just my luck.

Or maybe David had planned it that way. Bobo had been missing since Monday, the day the satellites went down, and David had probably opened the door for him when I wasn't looking, like always, and then given him an extra kick, gloating because he knew I wouldn't be able to follow Bobo's signal.

I hadn't been too worried yet, on Monday. Bobo was gone when I got back from school, but I thought he'd come home for dinner, the way he always did. When he didn't, I went outside and called him and checked in neighbors' yards. I started to get scared when I couldn't find him, but Mom said not to worry, Bobo would come back later, and even if he didn't, he'd probably be okay even if he stayed out overnight.

But he wasn't back for breakfast on Tuesday, either, and by that night I was frantic, especially since the satellites were still down and I had no idea where Bobo was and I couldn't find him in any of the places where he usually hung out. Wednesday and Thursday and Friday were hell. I carried the handheld with me everyplace, waiting for it to light up again, hunched over it every second, even at school, while Johnny Schuster and Leon Flanking carried on in the background the way they always did. "Hey, Mike! Hey Michael—you know what we're doing after school today? We're driving down to Carson, Mike. Yeah, we're going down to Carson City, and you know what we're going to do down there? We're going to—"

Usually I was pretty good at just ignoring them. I knew I couldn't let them get to me, because that was what they wanted. They wanted me to fight them and get in trouble, and I couldn't do that to Mom, not with so much trouble in the family already. I didn't want her to know what Johnny and Leon were saying; I didn't want her to have to think about Johnny and Leon at all, or why they were picking on me. Our families used to be friends, but that was a long time ago, before my father died and theirs went to jail. Johnny and Leon think it was all my father's fault, as if their own dads couldn't have said no, even if my dad was the one who came up with the idea. So they're mean to me, because my father isn't around anymore for them to blame.

It was harder to ignore them the week the satellites were down. Mom's bosses were checking up on her a lot more, because their handhelds weren't working either. We got calls at home every night to make sure she was really there, and when she was at work, somebody had to go with her if she even left the building. Just like the old days, before the handhelds. And God only knew what David was up to. I guess he was still going to his warehouse job, driving a forklift and moving boxes around, because his boss would have called the probation office if he hadn't shown up. But he wasn't coming home when he was supposed to, and every time he did come home, he and Mom had screaming fights, even worse than usual.

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So I had five days of not knowing where Bobo was, while Johnny and Leon baited me at school and Mom and David yelled at each other at home. And then finally the satellites came back online on Friday. The GPS people had been talking about how they might have to knock the whole system out of orbit and put up another one—which would have been a mess—but finally some earthside keyboard jockey managed to fix whatever the hackers had done.

Which was great, except that down here in Reno it had been snowing for hours, and according to the GPS, I was going to have to climb 3,200 feet to reach Bobo. Mom came in just as I was stuffing some extra energy bars in my pack. I knew she wouldn't want me going out, and I wasn't up to fighting with her about it, so I'd been hoping the snow would delay her for a few hours, maybe even keep her down in Carson overnight. I should have known better. That's what Mom's new SUV was for: getting home, even in shitty weather.

She looked tired. She always looks tired after a shift.

"What are you doing?" she said, and looked over my shoulder at the handheld screen, and then at the topo map next to it. "Oh, Jesus, Mike. It's on top of Peavine!"

I could smell her shampoo. She always smells like shampoo after a shift. I didn't want to think about what she smells like before she showers to come home.

"*He's* on top of Peavine," I said. "Bobo's on top of Peavine."

Mom shook her head. "Honey—no. You can't go up there."

"Mom, he could be *hurt!* He could have a broken leg or something and not be able to move and just be lying there!" The signal hadn't moved at all. If it had been lower down the mountain, I would have thought that maybe some family had taken Bobo in, but there still weren't any houses that high. The top of Peavine was one of the few places the developers hadn't gotten to yet.

"Sweetheart." Mom's voice was very quiet. "Michael, turn around. Come on. Turn around and look at me."

I didn't turn around. I stuffed a few more energy bars in my pack, and Mom put her hands on my shoulders and said, "Michael, he's dead."

I still kept my back to her. "You don't *know* that!"

"He's been gone for five days now, and the signal's on top of Peavine. He has to be dead. A coyote got him and dragged him up there. He's never gone that high by himself, has he?"

She was right. In the year he'd had the transmitter, Bobo had never gone anywhere much, certainly not anywhere far. He'd liked exploring the neighbors' yards, and the strips of wild land between the developments, where there were voles and mice. And coyotes.

"So he decided to go exploring," I said, and zipped my pack shut. "I have to go find out, anyway."

"Michael, there's nothing to find out. He's dead. You know that."

"I do *not* know that! I don't know anything." *Except that David's a piece of shit.* I did turn around, then, because I wanted to see her face when I said, "He hasn't been home since Monday, Mom, so how do I know what's happened? I haven't even *seen* him."

I guess I was up to fighting, after all. It was an awful thing to say, because it would only remind her of what we were all trying to forget, but I was still happy when she looked away from me, sharply, with a hiss of indrawn breath. She didn't curse me out, though, even though I deserved it. She didn't

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even leave the room. Instead she looked back at me, after a minute, and put her hands on my shoulders again. "You can't go out there. Not in this weather. It wouldn't even be safe to take the SUV, or I'd drive you—"

"He could be lying hurt in the snow," I said. "Or holed up somewhere, or—"

"Michael, he's dead." I didn't answer. Mom squeezed my shoulders and said gently, "And even if he *were* alive, you couldn't reach him in time. Not all that way; not in this weather. Not even in the SUV."

"I just want to know," I said. I looked right at her when I said it. I wasn't saying it to be mean, this time. "I can't stand not knowing."

"You do know," she said. She sounded very sad. "You just won't let yourself know that you know."

"Okay," I told her, my throat tight. "I can't stand not seeing, then. Is that better?"

She took her hands off my shoulders and sighed. "I'll call Letty, but it's not going to do any good. Is your brother home?"

"No," I said. David should have been home an hour before that. I wondered if he even knew that the satellites were back up.

Mom frowned. "Do you know where he is?"

"Of course not," I said. "Do you think I care? Call the sheriff's office, if you want to know where he is."

Mom gave me one of her patented warning looks. "Michael—"

"He let Bobo out," I said. "You know he did. He did it on purpose, just like all the other times. Do you think I care where the fuck he is?"

"I'm going to go call Letty," Mom said.

David hated Bobo the minute we got him. He was my tenth birthday present from Mom and Dad. The four of us went to the pet store to pick him out, but when David saw the kittens, he just wrinkled his nose and backed up a few feet. David was always doing things like that, trying to be cool by pretending he couldn't stand the rest of us.

David and I used to be friends, when we were younger. We played catch and rode our bikes and dug around in the dirt pretending we were gold miners, and once David even pulled me out of the way of a rattlesnake, because I didn't recognize the funny noise in the bushes and had gone to see what it was. I was six then, and David was ten. I'll never forget how pale he was after he yanked me away from the rattling, how scared he looked when he yelled at me never, *ever* to do that again.

The four-year difference didn't matter back then, except that it meant David knew a lot more than I did. But once he got into high school, David didn't want anything to do with any of us, especially his little brother. And all of a sudden, he didn't seem so smart to me anymore, even though he thought he was smarter than shit.

I named my new kitten Bobcat, because he had that tawny coat and little tufts on his ears. His name got shortened to Bobo pretty quickly, though, and that's what we always called him—everybody except David, who called him "Hairball." By the time Dad died, Bobo was a really big cat: fifteen pounds, anyway, which was some comfort when David started "accidentally" letting Bobo out of the house. I figured he could hold his own against most other cats, maybe even against owls. I tried not to think about cars and coyotes, and people with guns.

He started going over the fence right away, but he was good about coming home. He always showed up for meals, even if sometimes he brought along

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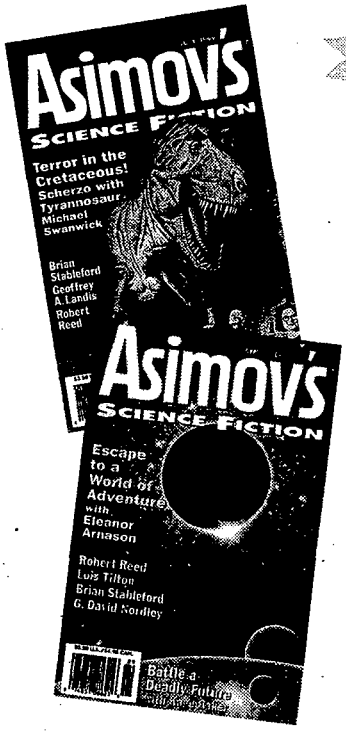

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his own dessert: dead grasshoppers, and mice and voles, and once a baby bird. Dr. Mills says that when cats bring you dead prey, it's because they think you're their kittens, and they're trying to feed you.

Bobo was a good cat, but David kept letting him out, no matter how much I yelled at him about it. Mom tried to ground David a couple of times, but it didn't work. David just laughed. He kept letting Bobo out, and Bobo kept going over the fence. It took me four months of allowance, plus Christmas and birthday money, to save up enough for the transmitter chip and the handheld. David laughed about that, too.

"He's just a fucking *cat,* Mike. Jesus Christ, what are you spending all your money on that transmitter thing for?"

"So I can find him if he gets lost," I said, my stomach clenching. Even then, I could hardly stand to talk to David.

"If he gets lost, so what? They have a million more cats at the pound."

And you'd let them all out if you could, wouldn't you? "They don't have a million who are mine," I said, and Mom looked up from chopping onions in the kitchen. It was one of her days off.

"David, leave him alone. You're the one who should be paying for that transmitter, you know." And they got into a huge fight, and David stomped out of the house and roared off in his rattletrap Jeep, and when all the dust had settled, Mom came and found me in my room. She sat down on the side of the bed and smoothed my hair back from my forehead, as if I was seven again instead of thirteen, and Bobo jumped down from where he'd been lying on my feet. He'd been licking the place where Dr. Mills had put the transmitter chip in his shoulder. Dr. Mills said that licking would help the wound heal, but that if Bobo started biting it, he'd have to wear one of those weird plastic collars that looks like a lampshade. I hadn't seen him biting it yet, but I was keeping an eye on him. When Mom sat on the bed, he resettled himself under my desk lamp, where the light from the bulb warmed the wood, and went back to licking.

Bobo always liked warm places. Dr. Mills says all cats do.

Mom stroked my forehead, and watched Bobo for a little while, and then said, "Michael—sometimes you can know exactly where people are, and still not be able to protect them." As if I didn't know that. As if any of us had been able to protect Dad from his own stupidity, even though the pit bosses knew exactly where he was every time he dealt a hand.

I knew that Mom was thinking about Dad, but there was no point talking about it. Dad was gone, and Bobo was right in front of me. "I'd keep him inside if I could, Mom! If David—"

"I know," she said. "I know you would." And then she gave me a quick kiss on the forehead and went downstairs again, and after a while, Bobo got off the desk and came back to lie on my feet. Watching him lick his shoulder, I wondered what it felt like to have a transmitter.

I'm the only one in the family who doesn't know.

Letty is Mom's best friend; they've known each other since second grade. Letty works for the BLM, and they have really good topo maps, so she could tell me exactly where Bobo was: just inside the mouth of an abandoned mine.

"He could have crawled there to get out of the snow," I said. The transmitter signal still hadn't moved. Mom and Letty exchanged looks, and then Mom got up. "I'm going upstairs now," she said. "You two talk."

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"He *could* have," I said.

"Oh, Michael," Mom said. She started to say something else, but then she stopped. "Talk to Letty," she said, and turned and left the room.

I listened to Mom's footsteps going upstairs, and after a minute Letty said, "Mike, it's not safe to go out there now. You know that, right? It wouldn't be safe even in a truck. Not in this weather. And in the snow, you can know exactly where something is and still not be able to get at it."

"I know," I said. "Like that hiker last year. The one whose body they didn't find until spring." Except that the hiker hadn't had a transmitter, so they hadn't known where he was. It didn't matter. For ten days after he went missing, the cops and the BLM had search teams and helicopters all over the mountain, and never mind the weather.

"Yes," Letty said, very quietly. "Exactly." She waited for me to say something, but I didn't. "That guy was dying, you know. He was in a lot of pain all the time. His wife said later she thought maybe that was why he went out in a storm like that, while he could still go out at all."

Letty stopped and waited again, and I kept my head down. "He went out in bad weather," she said finally, "near dark. It's snowing now, and you were getting ready to hike up the mountain when your mom got home at seven-thirty. Michael?"

"Bobo could still be alive," I said fiercely. "It's not like anybody else *cares*. It's not like the state's going to spend thousands of dollars on a search-and-rescue!"

"So you were thinking—what?" Letty said. "That you'd go up there and get everybody hysterical, and get a search going, and while they were at it, they'd bring Bobo back? Was that the plan?"

"No," I said. I felt a little sick. I hadn't thought about any of that. I hadn't even thought about how I was going to get Bobo back down the mountain once I found him. "I just—I just wanted to get Bobo, that's all. I thought I could go up there and it would be okay. I've hiked in snow before."

"At night?" Letty asked. Then she sighed. "Mike, you know, a lot of people care about Bobo. Your mom cares, and I care, and Rich Mills cares. He was a sweet cat, and we know you love him. But we care about you, too."

"I'm fine," I told her. I wasn't sitting in the mouth of a mine during a snowstorm. I wasn't registered with the sheriff's office.

"You wouldn't be fine if you went up on Peavine tonight," Letty said. "That's the point. And even if Bobo's still alive—and I don't think he can be, Michael—you can't help him if you're frozen to death in a gully somewhere. Okay?"

I stared at the handheld, at the stationary signal. I thought about Bobo huddled in the mouth of the mine, getting colder and colder. He hated being cold. "Is it true that when you freeze to death," I said, "you feel warm at the end?"

"That's what I hear," Letty said. "I don't plan to test it."

"I don't either. That wasn't what I meant."

"Good. Don't do anything stupid, Mike. Search-and-rescue might not be able to get you out of it."

I felt like I was suffocating. "I was putting food in my pack. An entire box of energy bars. Ask Mom."

Letty shrugged. "Energy bars won't keep you from freezing."

"I *know* that."

"Good. And one more thing: don't you pay any mind to those Schuster and Flanking kids. They're slime."

I jerked my head up. How did she know about that? She raised an eye-

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brow when she saw my face, and said, "People talk. Folks at my office have kids in your school. Those bullies are slime, Michael, and everybody knows it. Don't let them give you grief. Your mother's a good person."

"I know she is." I wanted to ask Letty if she'd told Mom about Johnny and Leon, wanted to beg her not to tell Mom, but the way adults did things, that probably meant that telling Mom would be the first thing she'd do.

Letty nodded. "Good. Just ignore them, then."

It was easy for her to say. She didn't have to listen to them all the time. "That wasn't why I was going out," I told her. "I was going after Bobo."

"I know you were," Letty said. "I also know nothing's simple." She folded her topo map and stood up and said, "I'd better be getting on home, before the weather gets any worse. Tell your Mom I'll talk to her tomorrow. And try to have a good weekend." She ruffled my hair before she went, the way Mom had when Bobo got the chip. Letty hadn't done that since I was little. I didn't move. I just sat there, looking at the blip on the handheld.

After a while, I went up to my room. David hadn't come back yet, not that I cared, and Mom's door was closed. I knew she was sleeping off the shift. I also knew she'd be out of bed and downstairs in two seconds if she heard David coming in or me going out. She'd hung the front and back doors with bells, brass things from Nepal or someplace she'd gotten at Pier One. You couldn't go out or come in without making a racket, and you couldn't take the bells off the door without making one, either. "You learn to sleep lightly when you have babies," Mom told me once, as if either me or David had been babies for years. And our windows were old, and pretty noisy in their own right. And it was snowing harder.

So I just sat on my bed and stared out the window at the snow, trying not to think. My window faces east, away from Peavine, toward downtown. I couldn't see the lights from the casinos because of the snow, but I knew they were there. After a while it stopped snowing, and a few stars came out between the clouds, and so did the neon: the blue and white stripes of the Peppermill, which stands apart from everything else, south of downtown, and the bright white of the Hilton a bit north of that—"the Mother ship," Mom always calls it—and then, clustered downtown, the red of Circus Circus and the green of Harrah's, which Mom calls Oz City, and the flashing purple of the Silverado, where Dad used to work.

Dad loved this view; he was so proud that we could look down on the city. He couldn't stop crowing about it to all his friends. I remember when he brought George Flanking and Howard Schuster, Leon and Johnny's dads, into my room so they could look out my window, too. So they could see "the panorama." That was what Dad called it. We'd never been able to see anything from our old windows, except more trailers across the way. "I'm going to get us out of this box," Dad said when we lived there. "We're going to live in a real house, I swear we are." And then we moved here, to a real house, and pretty soon that wasn't big enough for him, either.

I shut my blinds and flopped down on my bed. Someplace a dog had started to bark, and then another joined in, and another and another, until the whole damn neighborhood was going nuts. And then I heard what must have set them off: the yipping howl of a coyote, trotting between houses looking for prey.

When we bought our house five years ago, the street ended a block from here, and that was where the mountain started. Winter mornings, some-

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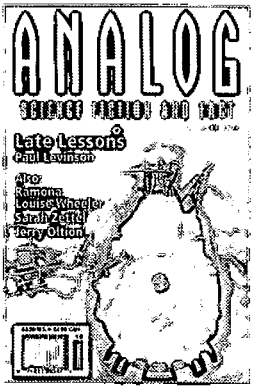

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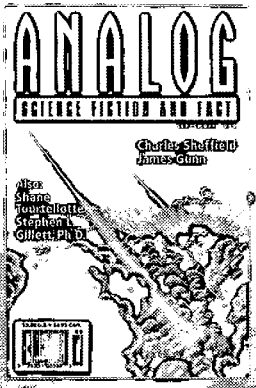

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times, we'd see coyotes in our driveway. Now the developers have built another hundred houses up the street, with more subdivisions going up all the time: fancy houses, big, the kind we could never afford, the kind that made Dad's eyes narrow, that made him spend hours hunched over his desk. The kind he talked about when he went out drinking with George and Howard, I guess. I don't know who's buying those big houses; casino and warehouse workers can't afford places like that. Mom could, maybe, if she weren't saving for nursing school. The only people I can think of who might live there are the ones who work for the development companies.

So we don't get coyotes in our driveway anymore, but they're still around. They travel in back of the houses, next to the six-foot fences people put around their yards. There's still sagebrush between the subdivisions, and rabbits, and you can still follow those little strips of wildness to the really wild places, up on the mountain.

Coyotes are unbelievably smart, and they'll eat anything if they have to, and it doesn't bother them when people cut the land into pieces. They like it, because the boundaries between city and wilderness are where rodents live, and rodents are about coyotes' favorite food, aside from cats. So when we cut things up for them, there are more edges where they can hunt. It doesn't hurt that we've killed most of the wolves, who eat coyotes when they can, or that coyotes look so much like dogs. They can sneak in just about anyplace. Dr. Mills says there are coyotes living in New York City now, in Central Park. There are millions of them, all over the country.

Ranchers and farmers hate them because they're so hard to kill, and because even if you kill them, there are always more. But I can't hate them, not even for eating cats. They're smart and they're beautiful, and they're just trying to get by, and as far as I can tell, they're doing a better job of it than we are. They know how to work the system. That's what Dad thought he was doing, but he wasn't smart enough.

I lay there, listening to that coyote and to all the dogs, still trying not to think, but thinking anyway: about what a weird town this is, where you get casinos and coyotes both, where the developers are covering everything with new subdivisions, but there's still a mountain where you can die. After a while it got quiet again, and I peeked out the window and saw more snow. A while after that I heard the bells jangling downstairs, and heard Mom's feet hitting her bedroom floor and thudding down the stairs. When she and David started yelling at each other, I pulled my pillow over my head and finally managed to go to sleep.

It wasn't snowing when I woke up on Saturday, but it looked like it might start again any minute. The transmitter signal still hadn't moved, and when I thought about Bobo out there in the cold, I felt my own heart freezing in my chest. I heard voices from downstairs, and smelled coffee and bacon. Mom and David were both home, then. I threw on clothing and grabbed the handheld and ran down to the kitchen.

"Good morning," Mom said, and handed me a plate of bacon and eggs. She was wearing sweats and looked pretty relaxed. David was wearing his bathrobe and scowling, but David always scowls. I wondered what he was doing up so early. "Any change on the screen, Mike?"

"No," I said. I knew she didn't think there ever would be, and I wondered why she'd asked. David's face had gone from scowling to murderous, but that was all right, because I planned to be out the door as soon as possible.

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"Okay," Mom said. "We're all going up there after breakfast."

"We are?" I said.

"Your brother's coming whether he wants to or not, and I asked Letty to come too. Rich Mills has to work this morning. Unless you'd rather not have all those people, honey."

"It's okay," I said. So that's what David was doing up. Mom was making him come as punishment, so he could see what he'd done, and Letty was coming because she had the maps, and maybe to help Mom keep me and David apart if we tried to kill each other. And Mom wouldn't think it was important to have Dr. Mills there, because she didn't think Bobo was still alive. I put down my plate and gulped down some coffee and said, "I'm going to go put the carrying case in the SUV."

"You're going to eat first," Mom said. "Sit down."

I sat. Driving up Peavine in the snow wasn't exactly Mom's idea of a day off; the least I could do was not give her any lip. David bit into his toast and said around a mouthful of bread, "I'm not going."

That was fine with me, but I wasn't going to say so in front of Mom. It was their fight. "You're coming," she told him. "And if Bobo's still alive you're paying the vet bills, and if he's not, you're buying your brother another cat. And if we get another cat you'll damn well help us keep it in the house, or I'll call the sheriff's office myself and tell them to take you off probation and put you in jail, David, I swear to God I will!"

She would, too. Even David knew that much. He scowled up at her and said, "The cat didn't *want* to stay in the house."

"That's not the issue," Mom said, and I stuffed my face full of eggs to keep from screaming at David that he'd hated Bobo, that he'd wanted Bobo to die, and that I hoped he'd die, too: alone, in the cold.

I remembered one of the first times David had let Bobo out. Bobo didn't have the transmitter yet, and I was in the backyard calling his name. Suddenly I saw something race over the fence and he ran up to me, mewing and mewing, his tail all puffy. I picked him up and carried him inside and he stayed on my lap, with his face stuck into my armpit like he was hiding, for half an hour, until finally he calmed down and stopped shaking and jumped down to get some food. I'd hoped that whatever had spooked him so badly would keep him from wanting to go out again, even if David opened all the doors and windows, but I guess he forgot how scared he'd been. "He didn't want to freeze to death, either," I said.

David pushed his chair back from the table and said, "Look, whatever happened to your fucking cat, it's not my fault, and I'm not wasting my day off going up there." He looked at Mom and said, "Do whatever you want: it doesn't matter. I might as well be in prison already."

"Bullshit," Mom said. "If you go to prison, you'll lose a lot more than a Saturday. Do you have any idea how lucky you are not to be there already? Especially after the stunts you've been pulling this week?" Nevada's a zero-tolerance drug state, even for minors, so when David got caught driving stoned last year, with most of a lid of pot in the glove compartment of his Jeep, Mom had to use every connection she had to get him probation instead of jail. It would have been a "juvenile facility," since David was still a few weeks short of eighteen, but Mom says that her connections said that wouldn't make much difference. Juvenile facilities are worse, if anything.

Mom didn't say who her connections are, and I don't want to know. Whoever they are, I figure they didn't help David entirely out of the goodness of

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their hearts. I figure they were scared of what Mom could tell people about them, even if what she does is legal.

"I told you," David said, "I've just been hanging out with some guys from work. You know: eating dinner, playing pool? I was in town."

"Right," Mom said. "And there's no way anybody could check that with the satellites down, is there? That's what you were counting on."

David rolled his eyes. "What time did the damn GPS go back up last night? Six-thirty or something? We were still eating then. We were at that pizza place in the mall. Call the sheriff's office and ask them, if you don't believe me." He jerked a thumb at my handheld and said, "How stupid do you think I am? I knew it could come back online any second. What, I'm going to take off for Mexico or something?"

Mom didn't bother to answer. She and I were the smart ones in the family: David took after Dad. Anybody stupid enough to get caught with that much pot was stupid enough to do just about anything else, as far as I could tell, but the only time I'd even started to say anything like that, right after his arrest, David had just glared at me and said, "Yeah, well, if you'd had to look at what I had to look at, you'd smoke dope too, baby brother."

As if I hadn't wanted to look. As if I hadn't kept trying to go outside. As if even now I didn't keep imagining what it had looked like, a million different ways, enough to keep me awake, sometimes.

But even then, I knew that David had only said it to make me feel guilty. He knew just how to get at everybody. Now he gestured at the handheld again and said bitterly, "I can't wipe my ass without those people knowing about it."

He was needling Mom, because that's what Dad had always said about dealing blackjack at the Silverado. The dealers were under surveillance all the time: from pit bosses, from hidden cameras. "You can't get away from it," Dad said. "It's like working in a goddamn box, with the walls closing in on you." But Dad chose his box, and so did David.

"That's not the issue," Mom told David again. "It's more than staying in county limits, David. You're supposed to come home straight after work. You know that."

"So you're my jailer now? Just like the casino was Dad's and the Lyon County cops are—"

"Stop it," Mom said, her voice icy. "I'm not your jailer. I'm the one who kept you out of jail. You agreed to the terms of the probation!"

"Like you agreed to all those terms when you decided to go down to Carson and play *nurse*?"

Mom was out of her chair then, and David was out of his, and they stood nose to nose, glaring at each other, and I knew that there was no way we were all going up on Peavine today, because they wouldn't be able to sit in the same car even if David had wanted to go, even if I'd wanted him there. Nothing David says to Mom ever makes any real sense, but he knows exactly how to get to her. Sometimes he has to keep at it for a while, but Mom always snaps eventually, even if the same thing has happened a million times before. Just like Bobo being scared by something outside, and still going out again when David gave him the chance. David knows exactly how to get people to hurt themselves.

They were still eye-to-eye, like cats circling each other before a fight, when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," I said. Maybe it was Letty, and I could warn her about what was happening before she came inside.

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It was a cop. "Good morning, son," he said. "I'm looking for David. That your brother?"

"Yeah," I said, but my legs felt like wood, and I didn't seem to be able to get out of the way.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's just a routine drug test."

That was supposed to happen on Fridays. So David had skipped his drug test, too. My stomach shriveled some more. "Will he have to go to jail?" I said. The house would be a lot quieter if David was in jail, but school would be worse. If David went to jail, he'd probably be in the same place as George Flanking and Howard Schuster, and I didn't want to think too much about that.

The cop's face softened. "No. Not if he's clean. He'll get a warning, that's all."

And then Mom, behind me, said, "Michael, let him *in,*" and my legs came alive and I got out of the doorway, fast, and the cop came in, tipping his hat to Mom.

"Morning, ma'am." I wondered if Mom was remembering the last time the cops were at our house. I wondered if this cop was one of her connections. I wonder that about all kinds of people: my teachers and all the cops and storekeepers and Dr. Mills, even. I hate wondering it, but that's another thing I can't talk to Mom about. It would just hurt her. It would just make me like David, or like Aunt Tina, who hasn't even talked to us since Mom started working down in Carson.

The fight Aunt Tina picked with Mom was as bad as any of David's: worse, maybe, because she doesn't even live with us. She wasn't even here when Dad died. It was none of her business. "Oh, Sherry! How can you do *that,* of all things? With your boys the ages they are, after what their father did? How will be they be able to hold their heads up, knowing—"

"Knowing that their mother's keeping a roof over their heads? My secretarial job doesn't pay enough, Tina, not by itself—and if you know what else I can do to earn a hundred thousand a year, go right ahead and tell me!"

It was perfectly legal, and it would let Mom earn enough money to go to nursing school at UNR and get a job none of us would have to be embarrassed about. That's what she kept telling us. A year, she'd said, or two at the most. But it had already been two years, and she hadn't saved enough to quit yet, because the hundred thousand didn't include food or clothing or insurance, or all the tests Mom has to have to make sure she's still healthy. She has drug tests, too. She gets more tests than David does, even though she's not a criminal and never did anything wrong, and she has to pay for all of hers. And when she's in Carson, she can't go into a casino or a bar by herself, and she can't be seen in a restaurant with a man, and she has to be registered with the Lyon County Sheriff's Office—because technically, she's not in Carson at all. Her job's not legal in big towns: not in Reno, not in Vegas, not even in lousy little Carson City, the most pathetic excuse for a state capitol you ever saw. Mom has to work right outside Carson, in Lyon County, which is still plenty close enough to be convenient for her connections.

It used to be that the women in Mom's job couldn't even leave the buildings where they worked without somebody going with them, but now they have transmitters, instead. And it used to be that they had to work every day for three weeks, living at the job, and then get one week off, but some of them got together and lobbied to change that, because so many of them were single mothers, and they wanted to be able to go home to their kids at

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night. But they still can't live in the same county where they work, which is why Mom has to commute between Reno and Carson. Highway 395's the only way to get down there, and those thirty-five miles can get really bad in the winter. That's why Mom had to buy the SUV. The SUV wasn't included in the hundred thousand, either.

Mom doesn't know that I know a lot of this. I've heard her and Letty talking about it, especially about all the tests. Letty's afraid Mom's going to get something horrible and die, but Mom keeps pooh-poohing her. "For heaven's sake, Letty; it's not like they don't have to wear condoms!"

I got out of the cop's way and tried not to think about him wearing a condom. It's hard not to get really mad at Dad whenever I think things like that. It's hard not to get even madder at David. He has it easier than Mom does, and it's not fair. She's not the criminal.

I followed the cop into the kitchen. Mom was chit-chatting about the weather and pouring him a cup of coffee; David was disappearing down the hall to the bathroom, carrying a little plastic cup. I looked at the drug kit, sitting on the table next to our half-eaten breakfasts. "Only takes two minutes," the cop told me, "and then I'll be out of here and leave you folks to your weekend. Ma'am, you mind if I take my jacket off?"

"Of course not," she said, and he did, and when I saw the gun in its holster I took a step back, even though of course the cop would be wearing a gun, all cops wear guns. Nearly everybody around here owns guns anyway, except us. And Mom bit her lip and the cop stepped back too, away from me, raising his hands. He looked sad.

"Hey, hey, son, it's all right. I'll put the jacket back on."

"You don't have to," I said, my face burning. "I'm going up to my room, anyway." I wanted to get out of there before David came back out of the bathroom with his precious bodily fluids. I didn't want to stand around and find out what the drug tests said. So I went upstairs, wondering if there was anybody in the entire fucking town who didn't know everything about anything that had ever happened to us.

I flopped down on my bed again, waiting for the jangle of bells that would mean the cop had left. It came pretty quickly, and then there was another right after it, and I didn't hear any yelling, so I figured everything was okay. The phone had rung, somewhere in there. One of David's loser friends, maybe. Maybe he'd gone out. Maybe I wouldn't have to deal with him today. I wanted to be out on the mountain, climbing up to Bobo, but I knew the SUV would get there more quickly than I could, even with the delay.

But when I went back downstairs, David was in the living room watching TV, and Mom and Letty were sitting at the kitchen table, looking worried. I looked at Mom and she said, "Relax. Your brother's clean."

"Okay," I said. She and Letty had probably been talking about me. "Are we leaving soon?"

Mom looked down at the table. "Michael, honey, I'm sorry. We can't leave right away. I'm waiting for a call from the doctor."

I squinted at her. "From the *doctor?*"

"I'm fine," Mom said. "It's nothing, really. She's looking at some test results, that's all, and I may need to take some antibiotics. But I don't want to miss the call. We'll go right after that, okay?"

"I'm going now," I said. *I thought they had to wear condoms.* "He's been up there since last night, Mom!"

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Letty started to stand up. "Mike, I'll drive you—"

"You don't have to," I said. Right then, as much as I wanted to reach Bobo quickly, I wanted to be alone even more. "You can catch up with me after the doctor calls. Stay and talk to Mom." Stay and keep Mom and David out of each other's hair, I meant, and maybe Letty knew that, because she nodded and sat back down.

"Okay. We'll follow you as soon as we can. Be careful."

"Don't worry," I said. "It's not like you don't know where I'm going."

It felt good to be out, away from Mom and David, where I could finally breathe again. I cut over to the wild strip on the edge of our subdivision and started working my way up, past the new construction sites where the dumptrucks and jackhammers were roaring away, even on Saturday, up to where all the signs say Bureau of Land Management and National Forest Service. The signs don't mean much, because the Forest Service and the BLM can sell the land to developers anytime they want. Right now, though, the signs meant that I was on the edge of wildness stretching for miles, all the way to Tahoe.

When the construction noises faded, I started hearing the gunfire. Shooters come up on Peavine for target practice; you can always find rifle shells on the trails, and there are all kinds of abandoned cars and washing machines and refrigerators that people have hauled up here and shot into Swiss cheese. Sometimes the metal has so many holes you wonder how it holds its shape at all. "Redneck lace," Dad used to call it—Dad who'd grown up in a trailer, and was so proud that he'd gotten us out of one: Dad who couldn't stand being called a redneck, even though he came up on Peavine every weekend with George Schuster and Howard Flanking, so they could drink beer and shoot skeet.

After he died, I couldn't come up on the mountain for a long time. But gunfire's one of those things you can't get away from here, any more than you can avoid new subdivisions, and Peavine's the only place I can come to be alone, really alone. I can hike up here for hours and never see anybody else. The gunfire's far away, and nearby are sagebrush and rabbits and hawks. In the summer you see lizards and snakes, and in the winter, in the snow, you see the fresh tracks of deer and antelope. I've seen prints that looked like mountain lion; I've seen prints that looked like dog, but were probably coyote.

I hiked hard, pushing myself, taking the steepest trails. It takes me three hours to get to the top of Peavine in good weather, and today I wanted the most direct route I could find. When you're slogging up a 15 percent grade in the snow, it's harder to think about how miserable your cat would be, stuck up here in weather like this, and it's harder to think about what you want to do to your brother for letting him out. It's harder to think about who you know might be wearing condoms, or how condoms can break even when they're used right. It's harder to think about how angry you are that your mother's connections don't have to be tested before she is, to make sure she doesn't catch anything.

Mom never lied to me. She wouldn't say "some antibiotics" if she really meant "years of AIDS drugs." She wouldn't say it was nothing if she was scared she might be infected with something that could kill her. I was angry anyway, because nothing was fair.

So that 15 percent grade was just what I needed. If Mom and Letty fol-

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lowed me, they'd be coming the easy way, up the road. They'd probably be angry if they couldn't find me, but they'd also get to the mine before I did, and they'd be able to drive Bobo back down. I hadn't been able to bring the carrying case with me, but I wouldn't be able to get it back down the mountain with Bobo in it anyway, not by myself. I hoped Mom had remembered to put the carrying case in the SUV. I hoped Bobo would still be in any kind of shape to need the carrying case at all.

I'm sorry, I told him as I climbed. *I'm sorry I didn't come after you sooner. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from David. I'm sorry about whatever scared you. Bobo, please be alive. Please be okay.*

After a while, it started to snow. I kept going. I was wearing my warmest thermals and I was covered in Gore-Tex, and I had enough food in the pack for three days. And if Mom and Letty drove up in the snow and couldn't find me because I'd come back down, they'd really start freaking. So I headed on up, except that as soon as I could, I cut over to the road. I didn't see any fresh tire marks, which meant they were still behind me. I tromped along, checking the GPS every once in a while to make sure the signal hadn't moved, and then I heard a horn and turned around and saw headlights.

It was Dr. Mills. "Hey, Mike. I drove by your house when I got off work, and your mom said you'd headed up here." I scrambled into his truck; he had the heater blasting, and it felt good. "I hope you don't mind that your mom didn't come. My old truck can take the wear better than that fancy Suburban she has, and there's only so much room in here."

There was still plenty of room in the front seat. I glanced back at the flatbed: Dr. Mills had brought a carrying case, but of course on the way down, we'd want to be able to have Bobo in front with us, where it was warm. The part about Mom could have meant just about anything, depending on whether it was his excuse or hers. If it was hers, she could have been hoping that Dr. Mills would run a male-bonding father-figure trip on me, or she could have still been waiting for the doctor to call, or she and Letty could have been trying to force David to stay in the house somehow. Or all of the above. If it was his—I didn't want to think about what it meant for him to be saving wear on her SUV, or not wanting her in the truck at all. Dr. Mills is married. I didn't want to think about him driving down to Carson.

So I looked at the handheld again. "He's in an old mine up here," I said.

"Mmm-hmmm. That's what your mom told me. How long since he's moved?"

"Not since the satellites came back up," I said, and Dr. Mills nodded. He stayed quiet for a long time, and finally I said, "You think he's dead, don't you? That's what Mom thinks."

The snow was coming down harder now, the windshield wipers squeaking in a rhythm that kept trying to lull me to sleep. Dr. Mills could have told me he didn't want to go on; he could have turned around. He didn't do that. He knew I had to see as much as I could. "Michael," he said finally, "I've been a vet for fifteen years, and I've seen plenty of miracles. Animals are amazing. But I have to tell you, I think it would take a miracle for Bobo not to be dead."

"Okay," I said, trying to keep my voice steady.

"With coyotes," he said, "usually it's quick. They break the necks of their prey, the same as cats do with birds and mice. So unless Bobo got away for a few minutes and then got caught again, he wouldn't have suffered long."

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"Okay," I said, and looked at my hands. I wondered how long it would take me to break David's neck, and how much I could make him suffer while I did it. And then I thought, there goes David again, making me want to do something stupid, something that would only mean I was hurting myself.

It took us ten more minutes to get to the mine, and by then the snow was coming down so hard that we could hardly see a foot ahead of the truck. We got out and started walking toward where the mine should have been, snow stinging our faces. It was really cold. I couldn't see anything but snow: no rocks, not even the scrubby pines that grow up here. And within about ten feet I realized that the mine entrance was completely buried, and that even if we'd been able to find it, we'd probably need to dig through five feet of snow to get to Bobo.

"Michael," Dr. Mills yelled into my ear, over the wind. "Michael, I'm sorry. We have to go back."

I tried to say, "I know," but my voice wouldn't work. I turned around and headed toward the truck, and when I was back inside it, I started shivering, even when the heat was blasting again. I sat in the front seat, with the empty space between me and Dr. Mills where Bobo should have been, and shivered and hugged myself. Finally I said, "You get warm, just before you freeze to death. If the coyotes didn't kill him—or if he went up on his own—"

"He's not in pain," Dr. Mills said. "That's a cliché, isn't it? But it's true. Michael, wherever he is now, he doesn't hurt. I can promise you that." And then he started telling me about some poem called "The Heaven of Animals," where the animals remain true to their natures. The predators still hunt and exult over their kill, and their prey rise up again every morning, perfectly renewed, joyously taking their proper part in the chase.

I guess it's a nice idea, but all I could think about was Bobo, shivering, hiding his head under my arm because he was scared.

So we drove on down the mountain, and pretty soon the snow stopped coming down so hard, and when we got back down to the developments, there was hardly any snow at all. You could still hear the construction equipment, and gunfire far off. Maybe the target shooters had moved farther down to get away from the snow. Dr. Mills hadn't said anything for a while, but when we started hearing the guns, he looked over at me.

Don't, I thought. Don't say it. Don't say anything. Just take me home, Dr. Mills, please. Don't say it.

"I never told you," he said, very quietly, "how sorry I am about what happened to your dad."

I stared straight ahead, thinking about Bobo, thinking about the hiker who'd died on Peavine. I wondered how long it would take the snow to melt.

When Bobo was a kitten, Dad used to dangle pieces of string for him. He always dangled them just high enough so Bobo couldn't get at them, and he'd laugh and laugh, watching Bobo jump. "We're going to enter this cat in the *Olympics*," he said. "Look at him! He must've made three feet that time!"

Bobo had lots of toys he could play with anytime he wanted, balls and catnip mice and crumpled-up pieces of paper I'd toss on the floor for him. But the minute Dad dangled that string, he'd stop playing with the stuff he could catch and go after the thing he couldn't have.

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"Just like you," Mom always told him, watching them. "Just like you, Bill, jumping at what you'll never be able to get."

"Aw, now, Sherry! Why can't we have a Lexus? Why can't we have one of those fancy home theaters, huh?"

I thought he was kidding. Maybe Mom did, too.

When Dr. Mills dropped me off at home, David was gone, which was a good thing, because I don't know what I would have done if I'd had to look at him. Mom and Letty were still there. They tried to talk to me.

I didn't want to talk. I went straight up to my room and took off all the Gore-Tex and went to bed. I didn't want to think about what we didn't need anymore: the toys and the litter box and Bobo's food and water bowls. I knew I'd have to throw it all away. Mom had told David he had to get me another cat, but how could I get another cat? David would just let it out again. When I got into bed, I remembered that the handheld was still in my jacket pocket, and somehow that hurt more than anything else. I pulled my pillow over my head and turned my face to the wall. The pillow blocked out a lot, but I still heard the phone, and I still heard the jangling bells when Letty left, and I still heard them again when David came in. I couldn't block out the sounds of him and Mom yelling at each other, no matter how hard I tried.

I got up and tried to do homework, but that just made me think about how I was going to have to go to school on Monday morning. I tried to read, but all the words seemed flat and tasteless, like week-old bread. So finally I just sat on my bed, staring out at the casinos. They looked so small from here, little boxes you could pick up and throw like dice. And then I heard a coyote, off in the other direction.

Being good is one of the smallest boxes there is: Mom knows that, and so do I, and so did Dad. Mom was the only one who never complained about it, but what did I know? Maybe she hated it as much as I did. I didn't see how she could like it. Maybe she felt like Dad said he'd always felt, like the walls were closing in on her. "If I could just get outside," he always told me. "Working in that damn casino, no daylight anywhere, all those people watching you all the time, you just want to go outside and take a walk, Mike, you know what I mean?"

After Dr. Mills drove me up to the mine, I knew what Dad meant. I sat there with the walls closing in on me, and I couldn't breathe. I needed more room. I wanted to be outside with the coyotes, running around the outside of the boxes, invisible. Even if you try to watch a coyote to see what it's doing, even if you try to track it, it will disappear on you. It will fade into the grass, into the sagebrush, into shadows. And you'll know that wherever it is, it's laughing.

Sunday was quiet. David stayed in front of the TV, and I finally got my homework done, and Mom cleaned the house, humming to herself while she worked. She had to be on antibiotics for ten days, and she couldn't work until the infection was gone. "Ten-day vacation," she told me cheerfully, but she didn't get paid vacations any more than she got anything else. All it meant was ten days' pay out of the nursing-school fund.

Once I asked her what would happen if the Lyon County sheriff's office saw her transmitter signal outside the building where she works. What if they tracked it and found her in a bar, or in a casino, or in a restaurant with a man? Would she go to jail?

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She'd shaken her head and said very gently, "No, honey, I'd just lose my job. And I'd never do that, because it would be stupid." Because it would be like what Dad did, she meant. "Don't worry."

When I got up on Monday morning, my stomach hurt already. I hadn't been able to sleep very well, because I kept thinking about Bobo buried in the snow. I kept wondering about what I hadn't been able to see, worrying that maybe there'd been some way to save him and I hadn't figured it out.

I couldn't stand the idea of going to school. I couldn't stand facing Johnny and Leon; I couldn't stand the idea of going through all that and not being able to come home and have Bobo comfort me, curling up on my stomach the way he always did to get warm. I'd always been able to tell Bobo everything I couldn't talk about to anybody else, and now he was gone.

But I had to go to school, so I wouldn't upset Mom.

I had an algebra test first period. I knew the material; I could have done all the problems, but I couldn't make my hands move. I just sat there and stared at the paper, and when Mrs. Ogilvy called time, I handed it in blank.

She looked at it, and both her eyebrows went up. "Michael?"

"I didn't feel like it," I said.

"You didn't—Michael, are you sick? Do you want to go to the nurse?"

"No," I said, and walked away, out into the hall, to my next class, which was English. We were talking about Julius Caesar. I sat against the back wall and fell asleep, and when the bell rang I got up and went to Biology, where we were dissecting frogs. Biology was always bad, because Johnny and Leon were in there. They grabbed the lab station next to mine, and whenever they thought they could get away with it they whispered, "Hey, Mike, know what we're gonna do after school? Hey, Mike—we're gonna drive down to Carson. We're gonna drive down to Carson *and fuck your mother!*"

Donna Mauro, my lab partner, said, "They are *such* jerks."

"Yeah," I said, but I couldn't even look at Donna, because I was too ashamed. I knew that everybody in school knew what my mother did, but that didn't mean I liked it when Johnny and Leon reminded them. I wondered if one of Donna's parents worked for the BLM and had talked to Letty, but it could have been just about anybody.

I stared down at the frog. We were supposed to be looking for the heart. I pretended it was Johnny instead, and sliced off a leg. Then I pretended it was Leon, and sliced off the other leg.

Donna just watched me. "Um, Mike? What are you doing?"

"I thought I'd have frog legs for lunch," I said. My voice sounded weird to me, tinny. "Want one?"

"Um—Mike, that's cool, but we have to find the heart now."

I handed her the scalpel. "Here. You find the heart."

And then I turned and walked away.

It was really easy, actually. I just walked out of the room, like I had to go to the bathroom but had forgotten to ask permission. Behind me I could hear Mr. Favaro, our teacher, saying something, and Donna answering, but the voices didn't really reach me. I felt like I was inside a bubble: I could see outside, but everything was muffled, and no one could get inside. They'd just bounce off.

It was wonderful.

I walked along the hall, and Mr. Favaro ran up behind me, gabbling something. I had to listen really carefully to make out what he was saying.

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It sounded like he was on the moon. "Mike? Michael? Is there something you need to tell me?"

I considered this. "No," I said. If I'd been Leon or Johnny or one of the bad kids, Mr. Favaro probably would have yelled at me and told me to get back inside the room, *now,* but he was spooked because it was me acting this way. So he gabbled some more, and I ignored him, and finally he ran away in the other direction, toward the principal's office.

I just walked out the door. My jacket was back in my locker, but it was pretty warm out, at least in the sun, and I wasn't cold. The bubble kept me warm. I started walking down a gully that angled down past the football field. I could hear voices behind me; I didn't stop to try to figure out what they were saying. But then a van pulled up alongside the gully, and people got out, and the voices started again. "Michael. Michael Michael Michael Michael Michael."

"*What?*" I said. Ms. Dellafield was there, the principal, and Mr. Ambrose, the school nurse, and two guidance counselors whose names I could never remember. They all looked really scared. I blinked at them. "I just wanted to take a walk," I said, but they were in a semicircle around me, pushing at the edges of the bubble, herding me toward the van. "You don't have to do this," I told them. "Really. I'm fine. I was just taking a walk."

They didn't listen. They kept herding me toward the van, and then I was inside it, and the door was closing.

They drove me back to school, and then they herded me into Mr. Ambrose's office, and then Ms. Dellafield went to call Mom while Mr. Ambrose and the two guidance counselors stood there and watched me, like they were going to tackle me if I tried to move. "Why are you doing this?" I kept asking them. "I was just going for a walk." It didn't make any sense. I'd seen other kids walk out of classes: they'd never gotten this kind of attention. "I'll go back to biology, okay? I'll dissect my frog. You don't have to call my mother!"

And at the same time I thought, thank God Mom's home today. Thank God she's not down in Carson, so that Ms. Dellafield doesn't have to hear them say whatever they say when they answer the phone there, not that there's any chance that Ms. Dellafield doesn't know where Mom works, since everybody else knows it. But even all that didn't bother me as much as usual, because the bubble was still basically holding. Mr. Ambrose and the guidance counselors kept asking me how I was, and I kept telling them I was fine, thank you, and how are all of you today? And they kept looking more and more worried, as if I'd answered them in another language, one where "fine" meant "my eyeballs are about to explode." So I sat there feeling fine, if a little far away, and thinking, these people are really weird.

And finally, after about half an hour, I heard voices outside Mr. Ambrose's office, and then the door opened and Mom came in. She was leaning on David. David had his arm around her, and he was really pale. It was the same way he'd looked after he pulled me away from the rattlesnake.

I squinted at him and said, "What are *you* doing here? What happened?"

"She called me," David said. He sounded like he was choking. "At work. When they called her. So we could come over here together."

I looked at Mom. She was crying, and then I got really scared. "What's going on?" I said. "Mom, what's wrong? Are you okay? Did something happen to Letty?" Maybe Mom had called Ms. Dellafield and said something had

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happened and they had to find me. But that wouldn't explain the van and the guidance counselors, would it? If something had happened to Letty, wouldn't Mom have driven over here to tell me herself?

Everybody just stared at me. Mom stopped crying, and wiped her eyes, and said very quietly, "Michael, the question is, are *you* okay?"

"I'm *fine!* Why does everybody keep asking me that? I was just going for a walk! Why doesn't anybody believe me?"

And Mom started crying again and David shook his head and said, "Oh, you stupid—"

"David." Ms. Dellafield sounded very tired. "Don't."

I felt like I was going crazy. "Would somebody please tell me what's going on? I was just—"

"Michael," Mom said, "that's what your father said, too."

I blinked. The room had gotten impossibly quiet, as if nobody else was even breathing. Mom said, "He said he was just going for a walk, and then he went out into the yard. Don't you remember?"

I looked away from all of them, out the window. I didn't remember that. I didn't remember anything that had happened that day, before the shot. It didn't matter: everyone else at school knew the story, and they'd remembered it for me. "I really was just going for a walk," I said, and then, "I don't even have a gun."

Ms. Dellafield said I should take the rest of the day off, so Mom and David and I drove home together, in David's jeep. When Ms. Dellafield called Mom at home, Mom had been too upset even to drive, so she'd called David and he'd left work and picked her up and driven her to school. He drove us all home, too. He drove really carefully. Once a squirrel ran into the road and David slowed down until it got out of his way. I'd never seen him drive like that before. And when we were walking into the house, Mom tripped, and David reached out to steady her.

The last time I'd seen Mom and David leaning on each other, they'd been coming in from the yard. I remembered that part. My ears had still been ringing, but Letty wouldn't let me go, no matter how hard I fought. She'd been eating lunch with us when it happened. "Let me see," I kept telling her, trying to break free. "Let me go out there! I want to see what happened!"

But Letty wouldn't let go, because the first thing that happened after the shot was that Mom and David ran out into the yard, and David started screaming, and then Mom yelled at Letty, "Keep Michael inside! Don't let him come out here!"

And they came back inside, and Mom called the police, and I kept saying, "I want to go see," and David kept shaking his head and saying, "No you don't, Michael, you don't want to see this, you really don't," and Letty wouldn't let go of me. And the cops came and asked everybody questions, and then Letty took me to her house, and by the time I got home, Mom and David had cleaned up the backyard, picked up all the little pieces of bone and brain, so that there was nothing left to see at all.

Dad was stupid. You can't beat the house: anybody who's ever been anywhere near a casino knows that. But he and George and Howard were trying. They'd worked out a system, the newspaper said; George or Howard, never both at once, would go in and play at Dad's table, and Dad would touch a cheek or scratch an ear, always a different signal, so they'd know

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when to double their bets. And then when they won, they'd split the take with him. They tried to be smart. They didn't do it very often, but it was often enough for the pit bosses and the cameras to catch on. And somehow, when Dad came home that day, he knew he'd been caught. He knew the walls were closing in.

George and Howard went to jail. I guess Dad knew he'd have to go there too. I guess he thought that was just too small a box.

Nobody said anything for a long time, after we got home from school. Mom started unloading the dishwasher, moving in little jerks like somebody in an old silent movie, and David sat down at the kitchen table, and I went to the fridge and got a drink of juice. And finally David said, "Why the hell did you do that?"

He didn't sound angry, or like he was trying to piss me off. He just sounded lost. And I hadn't been trying to do anything; I'd just been going for a walk, but I'd said that at least a million times by now and it was no good. Nobody believed me, or nobody cared. So instead I said, "Why did you keep letting Bobo out?"

And Mom, with her back to us, stopped moving; she stood there, holding a plate, looking down at the open dishwasher. And David said, "I don't know."

Mom turned and looked at him, then, and I looked at Mom. David never admitted there was anything he didn't know. He stared down at the table and said, "You kept saying you wanted to go outside. You kept—you were *fighting* to go outside. The cat wanted to go out, Michael. He did." He looked up, straight at me; his chin was trembling. "You didn't even have to look at it. It wasn't fair."

His voice sounded much younger, then, and I flashed back on that day when he saved me from the rattlesnake, when we were still friends, and all of a sudden my bubble burst and I was back in the world, where it hurt to breathe, where the air against my skin felt like sandpaper. "So you wanted me to get my wish by having to look at Bobo?" I said. "Is that it? Like I wanted any of it to happen, you fuckhead? Like—"

"Shhhh," Mom said, and came over and hugged me. "Shhhh. It's all right now. It's all right. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. David—"

"Forget it," David said. "None of it matters anymore, anyway."

"Yes it does," Mom said. "David, I made you do too much. I—"

"I want to go for a walk now," I said. I was going to scream if I couldn't get outside; I was going to scream or break something. "Can we just go for a walk? All of us? You can watch me, okay? I promise not to do anything stupid. Please?"

Mom and David have gotten along a lot better since then. Letty and I talked about it, once. She said they'd probably been fighting so much because David was mad at Mom for making him help her in the yard when Dad died, and Mom felt guilty about it, and didn't even know she did, and kept lashing out at him. And none of us were talking about anything, so it festered. Letty said that what I did at school that day was exactly what I needed to do to remind Mom and David how much they could still lose, to make them stop being mad at each other. And I told her I hadn't been trying to do anything, and anyway I hadn't even remembered what Dad had said before he went out into the yard. She said it didn't matter. It was instinct, she said. She said people still have instincts, even when they live in

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boxes, and that we can't ever lose them completely, not if we're still alive at all. Look at Bobo, she told me. You got him from a pet store. He'd never even lived outside, but he still wanted to get out. He still knew he was supposed to be hunting mice.

In June, when the snow melted from the top of Peavine, I hiked back up to the mine. I'd been back on the mountain before that, of course, but I hadn't gone up that high: maybe because I thought I wouldn't be able to see anything yet, maybe because I was afraid I would. But that Saturday I woke up, and it was sunny and warm, and Mom and David were both at work, and I thought, okay. This is the day. I'll go up there by myself, to see. To say goodbye.

All those months, the transmitter signal hadn't moved.

So I hiked up, past the developments, through rocks and sagebrush, scattering basking lizards. I saw a few rabbits and a couple of hawks, and I heard gunfire, but I didn't see any people.

When I got to the mine, I peered inside and couldn't see anything. I'd brought a flashlight, but it's dangerous to go inside abandoned mines. Even if it's safe to breathe the air, even if you don't get trapped, you don't know what else might be in there with you. Snakes. Coyotes.

So I shone the flashlight inside and looked for anything that might have been a cat once. There were dirt and rocks, but I couldn't even see anything that looked like bones. The handheld said this was the place, though, so I scrabbled around in the dirt a little bit, and played the flashlight over every surface the beam would reach, and finally, maybe two feet inside the mine, I saw something glinting in a crevice in the rock.

It was the chip: just the chip, a tiny little piece of silver circuitry, sitting there all by itself. Maybe there'd been bones too, for a while, and something had carried them off. Or maybe something had eaten Bobo and left a pile of scat here, with the chip in it, and everything had gone back into the ground except the chip. I don't know. All I knew was that Bobo was gone, and I still missed him, and there wasn't even anything that had been him to bring back with me.

I sat there and looked at the chip for a while, and then I put the handheld next to it. And then I went and sat on a rock outside the mine, in the sun.

It was pretty. There were wildflowers all over the place, and you could see for miles. And I sat there and thought, I could just leave. I could just walk away, walk in the other direction, clear to Tahoe, walk away from all the boxes. I don't have a transmitter. Nobody would know where I was. I could walk as long as I wanted.

But there are boxes everywhere, aren't there? Even at Tahoe, maybe especially at Tahoe, where all the rich people build their fancy houses. And if I walked away, Mom and David wouldn't know where I was. They wouldn't even have a transmitter signal. And I knew what that felt like. I remembered staring at the dark screen, when the satellites were offline. I remembered staring at it, and trying not to cry, and praying. *Please, Bobo, come back home. Please come back, Bobo. I love you.*

So I sat there for a while, looking out over the city. And then I ate an energy bar and drank some water, and headed back down the mountain, back home. ❍

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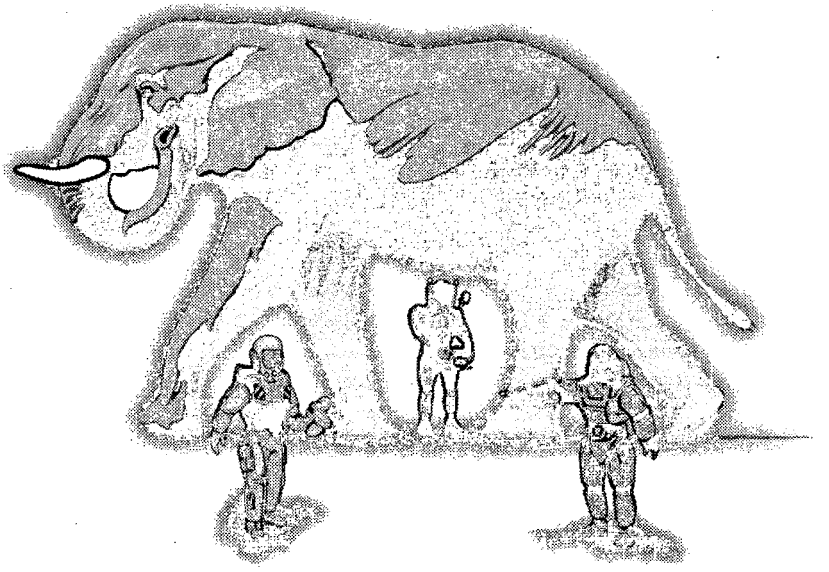

In Mike Resnick's chilling new tale, the first human expedition to one of the outer planets, discovers that they have been beaten to their destination by . . .

THE ELEPHANTS ON NEPTUNE

Mike Resnick

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The elephants on Neptune led an idyllic life.

None ever went hungry or were sick. They had no predators. They never fought a war. There was no prejudice. Their birth rate exactly equaled their death rate. Their skins and bowels were free of parasites.

The herd traveled at a speed that accommodated the youngest and weakest members. No sick or infirm elephant was ever left behind.

They were a remarkable race, the elephants on Neptune. They lived out their lives in peace and tranquility, they never argued among themselves, the old were always gentle with the young. When one was born, the entire herd gathered to celebrate. When one died, the entire herd mourned its passing. There were no animosities, no petty jealousies, no unresolved quarrels.

Only one thing stopped it from being Utopia, and that was the fact that an elephant never forgets.

Not ever.

No matter how hard he tries.

When men finally landed on Neptune in 2473 A.D., the elephants were very apprehensive. Still, they approached the spaceship in a spirit of fellowship and goodwill.

The men were a little apprehensive themselves. Every survey of Neptune told them it was a gas giant, and yet they had landed on solid ground. And if their surveys were wrong, who knew what else might be wrong as well?

A tall man stepped out onto the frozen surface. Then another. Then a third. By the time they had all emerged, there were almost as many men as elephants.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said the leader of the men. "You're elephants!"

"And you're men," said the elephants nervously.

"That's right," said the men. "We claim this planet in the name of the United Federation of Earth."

"You're united now?" asked the elephants, feeling much relieved.

"Well, the survivors are," said the men.

"Those are ominous-looking weapons you're carrying," said the elephants, shifting their feet uncomfortably.

"They go with the uniforms," said the men. "Not to worry. Why would we want to harm you? There's always been a deep bond between men and elephants."

That wasn't exactly the way the elephants remembered it.

326 B.C.

Alexander the Great met Porus, King of the Punjab of India, in the Battle of the Jhelum River. Porus had the first military elephants Alexander had ever seen. He studied the situation, then sent his men out at night to fire thousands of arrows into extremely sensitive trunks and underbellies. The elephants went mad with pain and began killing the nearest men they could find, which happened to be their keepers and handlers. After his great victory, Alexander slaughtered the surviving elephants so that he would never have to face them in battle.

217 B.C.

The first clash between the two species of elephants. Ptolemy IV took his African elephants against Antiochus the Great's Indian elephants.

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The elephants on Neptune weren't sure who won the war, but they knew who lost. Not a single elephant on either side survived.

Later that same 217 B.C.

While Ptolemy was battling in Syria, Hannibal took thirty-seven elephants over the Alps to fight the Romans. Fourteen of them froze to death, but the rest lived just long enough to absorb the enemy's spear thrusts while Hannibal was winning the Battle of Cannae.

"We have important things to talk about," said the men. "For example, Neptune's atmosphere is singularly lacking in oxygen. How do you breathe?"

"Through our noses," said the elephants.

"That was a serious question," said the men, fingering their weapons ominously.

"We are incapable of being anything *but* serious," explained the elephants. "Humor requires that someone be the butt of the joke, and we find that too cruel to contemplate."

"All right," said the men, who were vaguely dissatisfied with the answer, perhaps because they didn't understand it. "Let's try another question. What is the mechanism by which we are communicating? You don't wear radio transmitters, and because of our helmets we can't hear any sounds that aren't on our radio bands."

"We communicate through a psychic bond," explained the elephants.

"That's not very scientific," said the men disapprovingly. "Are you sure you don't mean a telepathic bond?"

"No, though it comes to the same thing in the end," answered the elephants. "We know that we sound like we're speaking English to you, except for the man on the left who thinks we're speaking Hebrew."

"And what do we sound like to you?" demanded the men.

"You sound exactly as if you're making gentle rumbling sounds in your stomachs and your bowels."

"That's fascinating," said the men, who privately thought it was a lot more disgusting than fascinating.

"Do you know what's *really* fascinating?" responded the elephants. "The fact that you've got a Jew with you." They saw that the men didn't comprehend, so they continued: "We always felt we were in a race with the Jews to see which of us would be exterminated first. We used to call ourselves the Jews of the animal kingdom." They turned and faced the Jewish spaceman. "Did the Jews think of themselves as the elephants of the human kingdom?"

"Not until you just mentioned it," said the Jewish spaceman, who suddenly found himself agreeing with them.

42 B.C.

The Romans gathered their Jewish prisoners in the arena at Alexandria, then turned fear-crazed elephants loose on them. The spectators began jumping up and down and screaming for blood—and, being contrarians, the elephants attacked the spectators instead of the Jews, proving once and for all that you can't trust a pachyderm.

(When the dust had cleared, the Jews felt the events of the day had reaffirmed their claim to be God's chosen people. They weren't the Romans' cho-

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sen people, though. After the soldiers killed the elephants, they put all the Jews to the sword, too.)

"It's not his fault he's a Jew any more than it's your fault that you're elephants," said the rest of the men. "We don't hold it against either of you."

"We find that difficult to believe," said the elephants.

"You do?" said the men. "Then consider this: the Indians—that's the good Indians, the ones from India, not the bad Indians from America—worshipped Ganesh, an elephant-headed god."

"We didn't know that," admitted the elephants, who were more impressed than they let on. "Do the Indians still worship Ganesh?"

"Well, we're sure they would if we hadn't killed them all while we were defending the Raj," said the men. "Elephants were no longer in the military by then," they added. "That's something tobe grateful for."

Their very last battle came when Tamerlane the Great went to war against Sultan Mahmoud. Tamerlane won by tying branches to buffaloes' horns, setting fire to them, and then stampeding the buffalo herd into Mahmoud's elephants, which effectively ended the elephant as a war machine, buffalo being much less expensive to acquire and feed.

All the remaining domesticated elephants were then trained for elephant fighting, which was exactly like cock-fighting, only on a larger scale. Much larger. It became a wildly popular sport for thirty or forty years until they ran out of participants.

"Not only did we worship you," continued the men, "but we actually named a country after you—the Ivory Coast. *That* should prove our good intentions."

"You didn't name it after *us*," said the elephants. "You named it after the parts of our bodies that you kept killing us for."

"You're being too critical," said the men. "We could have named it after some local politician with no vowels in his name."

"Speaking of the Ivory Coast," said the elephants, "did you know that the first alien visitors to Earth landed there in 1883?"

"What did they look like?"

"They had ivory exoskeletons," answered the elephants. "They took one look at the carnage and left."

"Are you sure you're not making this all up?" asked the men.

"Why would we lie to you at this late date?"

"Maybe it's your nature," suggested the men.

"Oh, no," said the elephants. "Our nature is that we always tell the truth. Our tragedy is that we always remember it."

The men decided that it was time to break for dinner, answer calls of nature, and check in with Mission Control to report what they'd found. They all walked back to the ship, except for one man, who lingered behind.

All of the elephants left too, except for one lone bull. "I intuit that you have a question to ask," he said.

"Yes," replied the man. "You have such an acute sense of smell, how did anyone ever sneak up on you during the hunt?"

"The greatest elephant hunters were the Wanderobo of Kenya and Uganda. They would rub our dung all over their bodies to hide their own scent, and would then silently approach us."

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"Ah," said the man, nodding his head. "It makes sense."

"Perhaps," conceded the elephant. Then he added, with all the dignity he could muster, "But if the tables were turned, I would sooner die than cover myself with *your* shit."

He turned away and set off to rejoin his comrades.

Neptune is unique among all the worlds in the galaxy. It alone recognizes the truism that change is inevitable, and acts upon it in ways that seem very little removed from magic.

For reasons the elephants couldn't fathom or explain, Neptune encourages metamorphosis. Not merely adaptation, although no one could deny that they adapted to the atmosphere and the climate and the fluctuating surface of the planet and the lack of acacia trees—but *metamorphosis*. The elephants understood at a gut level that Neptune had somehow imparted to them the ability to evolve at will, though they had been careful never to abuse this gift.

And since they were elephants, and hence incapable of carrying a grudge, they thought it was a pity that the men couldn't evolve to the point where they could leave their bulky spacesuits and awkward helmets behind, and walk free and unencumbered across this most perfect of planets.

The elephants were waiting when the men emerged from their ship and strode across Neptune's surface to meet them.

"This is very curious," said the leader.

"What is?" asked the elephants.

The leader stared at them, frowning. "You seem smaller."

"We were just going to say that you seemed larger," replied the elephants.

"This is almost as silly as the conversation I just had with Mission Control," said the leader. "They say there aren't any elephants on Neptune."

"What do they think we are?" asked the elephants.

"Hallucinations or space monsters," answered the leader. "If you're hallucinations, we're supposed to ignore you."

He seemed to be waiting for the elephants to ask what the men were supposed to do if they were space monsters, but elephants can be as stubborn as men when they want to be, and that was a question they had no intention of asking.

The men stared at the elephants in silence for almost five minutes. The elephants stared back.

Finally the leader spoke again.

"Would you excuse me for a moment?" he said. "I suddenly have an urge to eat some greens."

He turned and marched back to the ship without another word.

The rest of the men shuffled their feet uncomfortably for another few seconds.

"Is something wrong?" asked the elephants.

"Are we getting bigger or are you getting smaller?" replied the men.

"Yes," answered the elephants.

"I feel much better now," said the leader, rejoining his men and facing the elephants.

"You look better," agreed the elephants. "More handsome, somehow."

"Do you really think so?" asked the leader, obviously flattered.

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"You are the finest specimen of your race we've ever seen," said the elephants truthfully. "We especially like your ears."

"You do?" he asked, flapping them slightly. "No one's ever mentioned them before."

"Doubtless an oversight," said the elephants.

"Speaking of ears," said the leader, "are you African elephants or Indian? I thought this morning you were African—they're the ones with the bigger ears, right?—but now I'm not sure."

"We're Neptunian elephants," they answered.

"Oh."

They exchanged pleasantries for another hour, and then the men looked up at the sky.

"Where did the sun go?" they asked.

"It's night," explained the elephants. "Our day is only fourteen hours long. We get seven hours of sunlight and seven of darkness."

"The sun wasn't all that bright anyway," said one of the men with a shrug that set his ears flapping wildly.

"We have very poor eyesight, so we hardly notice," said the elephants. "We depend on our senses of smell and hearing."

The men seemed very uneasy. Finally they turned to their leader.

"May we be excused for a few moments, sir?" they asked.

"Why?"

"Suddenly we're starving," said the men.

"And I gotta use the john," said one of them.

"So do I," said a second one.

"Me too," echoed another.

"Do you men feel all right?" asked the leader, his enormous nose wrinkled in concern.

"I feel great!" said the nearest man. "I could eat a horse!"

The other men all made faces.

"Well, a small forest, anyway," he amended.

"Permission granted," said the leader. The men began walking rapidly back to the ship. "And bring me a couple of heads of lettuce, and maybe an apple or two," he called after them.

"You can join them if you wish," said the elephants, who were coming to the conclusion that eating a horse wasn't half as disgusting a notion as they had thought it would be.

"No, my job is to make contact with aliens," explained the leader. "Although when you get right down to it, you're not as alien as we'd expected."

"You're every bit as human as *we* expected," replied the elephants.

"I'll take that as a great compliment," said the leader. "But then, I would expect nothing less from traditional friends such as yourselves."

"Traditional friends?" repeated the elephants, who had thought nothing a man said could still surprise them.

"Certainly. Even after you stopped being our partners in war, we've always had a special relationship with you."

"You have?"

"Sure. Look how P.T. Barnum made an international superstar out of the original Jumbo. That animal lived like a king—or at least he did until he was accidentally run over by a locomotive."

"We don't want to appear cynical," said the elephants, "but how do you *accidentally* run over a seven-ton animal?"

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"You do it," said the leader, his face glowing with pride, "by inventing the locomotive in the first place. Whatever else we may be, you must admit we're a race that can boast of magnificent accomplishments: the internal combustion engine, splitting the atom, reaching the planets, curing cancer." He paused. "I don't mean to denigrate you, but truly, what have you got to equal that?"

"We live our lives free of sin," responded the elephants simply. "We respect each other's beliefs, we don't harm our environment, and we have never made war on other elephants."

"And you'd put that up against the heart transplant, the silicon chip, and the three-dimensional television screen?" asked the leader with just a touch of condescension.

"Our aspirations are different from yours," said the elephants. "But we are as proud of our heroes as you are of yours."

"You have heroes?" said the leader, unable to hide his surprise.

"Certainly." The elephants rattled off their roll of honor: "The Kilimanjaro Elephant. Selemundi. Mohammed of Marsabit. And the Magnificent Seven of Krueger Park: Mafunyane, Shingwedzi, Kambaki, Joao, Dzombo, Ndlulamithi, and Phelwane."

"Are they here on Neptune?" asked the leader as his men began returning from the ship.

"No," said the elephants. "You killed them all."

"We must have had a reason," insisted the men.

"They were there," said the elephants. "And they carried magnificent ivory."

"See?" said the men. "We *knew* we had a reason."

The elephants didn't like that answer much, but they were too polite to say so, and the two species exchanged views and white lies all through the brief Neptunian night. When the sun rose again, the men voiced their surprise.

"Look at you!" they said. "What's happening?"

"We got tired of walking on all fours," said the elephants. "We decided it's more comfortable to stand upright."

"And where are your trunks?" demanded the men.

"They got in the way."

"Well, if that isn't the damnedest thing!" said the men. Then they looked at each other. "On second thought, *this* is the damnedest thing! We're bursting out of our helmets!"

"And our ears are flapping," said the leader.

"And our noses are getting longer," said another man.

"This is most disconcerting," said the leader. He paused. "On the other hand, I don't feel nearly as much animosity toward you as I did yesterday. I wonder why?"

"Beats us," said the elephants, who were becoming annoyed with the whining quality of his voice.

"It's true, though," continued the leader. "Today I feel like every elephant in the universe is my friend."

"Too bad you didn't feel that way when it would have made a difference," said the elephants irritably. "Did you know you killed sixteen million of us in the twentieth century alone?"

"But we made amends," noted the men. "We set up game parks to preserve you."

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"True," acknowledged the elephants. "But in the process you took away most of our habitat. Then you decided to cull us so we wouldn't exhaust the park's food supply." They paused dramatically. "That was when Earth received its second alien visitation. The aliens examined the theory of preserving by culling, decided that Earth was an insane asylum, and made arrangements to drop all their incurables off in the future."

Tears rolled down the men's bulky cheeks. "We feel just terrible about that," they wept. A few of them dabbed at their eyes with short, stubby fingers that seemed to be growing together.

"Maybe we should go back to the ship and consider all this," said the men's leader, looking around futilely for something large enough in which to blow his nose. "Besides, I have to use the facilities."

"Sounds good to me," said one of the men. "I got dibs on the cabbage."

"Guys?" said another. "I know it sounds silly, but it's much more comfortable to walk on all fours."

The elephants waited until the men were all on the ship, and then went about their business, which struck them as odd, because before the men came they didn't *have* any business.

"You know," said one of the elephants. "I've got a sudden taste for a hamburger."

"I want a beer," said a second. Then: "I wonder if there's a football game on the subspace radio."

"It's really curious," remarked a third. "I have this urge to cheat on my wife—and I'm not even married."

Vaguely disturbed without knowing why, they soon fell into a restless, dreamless sleep.

Sherlock Holmes once said that after you eliminate the impossible, what remains, however improbable, must be the truth.
Joseph Conrad said that truth is a flower in whose neighborhood others must wither.
Walt Whitman suggested that whatever satisfied the soul was truth.
Neptune would have driven all three of them berserk.

"Truth is a dream, unless my dream is true," said George Santayana.
He was just crazy enough to have made it on Neptune.

"We've been wondering," said the men when the two groups met in the morning. "Whatever happened to Earth's last elephant?"

"His name was Jamal," answered the elephants. "Someone shot him."

"Is he on display somewhere?"

"His right ear, which resembles the outline of the continent of Africa, has a map painted on it and is in the Presidential Mansion in Kenya. They turned his left ear over—and you'd be surprised how many left ears were thrown away over the centuries before someone somewhere thought of turning them over—and another map was painted, which now hangs in a museum in Bombay. His feet were turned into a matched set of barstools, and currently grace the Aces High Show Lounge in Dallas, Texas. His scrotum serves as a tobacco pouch for an elderly Scottish politician. One tusk is on display at the British Museum. The other bears a scrimshaw and resides in a store window in Beijing. His tail has been turned into a fly swatter, and is the proud possession of one of the last *vaqueros* in Argentina."

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"We had no idea," said the men, honestly appalled.

"Jamal's very last words before he died were, 'I forgive you,'" continued the elephants. "He was promptly transported to a sphere higher than any man can ever aspire to."

The men looked up and scanned the sky. "Can we see it from here?" they asked.

"We doubt it."

The men looked back at the elephants—except that they had evolved yet again. In fact, they had eliminated every physical feature for which they had ever been hunted. Tusks, ears, feet, tails, even scrotums, all had undergone enormous change. The elephants looked exactly like human beings, right down to their spacesuits and helmets.

The men, on the other hand, had burst out of their spacesuits (which had fallen away in shreds and tatters), sprouted tusks, and found themselves conversing by making rumbling noises in their bellies.

"This is very annoying," said the men who were no longer men. "Now that we seem to have become elephants," they continued, "perhaps you can tell us what elephants *do?*"

"Well," said the elephants who were no longer elephants, "in our spare time, we create new ethical systems based on selflessness, forgiveness, and family values. And we try to synthesize the work of Kant, Descartes, Spinoza, Thomas Aquinas, and Bishop Berkeley into something far more sophisticated and logical, while never forgetting to incorporate emotional and aesthetic values at each stage."

"Well, we suppose that's pretty interesting," said the new elephants without much enthusiasm. "Can we do anything else?"

"Oh, yes," the new spacemen assured them, pulling out their .550 Nitro Expresses and .475 Holland & Holland Magnums and taking aim. "You can die."

"This can't be happening! You yourselves were elephants yesterday!"

"True. But we're men now."

"But why kill us?" demanded the elephants.

"Force of habit," said the men as they pulled their triggers.

Then, with nothing left to kill, the men who used to be elephants boarded their ship and went out into space, boldly searching for new life forms.

Neptune has seen many species come and go. Microbes have been spontaneously generated nine times over the eons. It has been visited by aliens thirty-seven different times. It has seen forty-three wars, five of them atomic, and the creation of 1,026 religions, none of which possessed any universal truths. More of the vast tapestry of galactic history has been played out on Neptune's foreboding surface than any other world in Sol's system.

Planets cannot offer opinions, of course, but if they could, Neptune would almost certainly say that the most interesting creatures it ever hosted were the elephants, whose gentle ways and unique perspectives remain fresh and clear in its memory. It mourns the fact that they became extinct by their own hand. Kind of.

A problem would arise when you asked whether Neptune was referring to the old-new elephants who began life as killers, or the new-old ones who ended life as killers.

Neptune just hates questions like that. ❍

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Analog Science Fiction and Fact and David Brin are proud to announce:

WEBS OF WONDER

a new contest for teachers, web designers, and folks who love science fiction.

A $1,000 cash first prize—plus additional great awards—will be handed out for excellence in creating sites on the World Wide Web that ***combine science fiction stories with subjects that today's students face in the classroom.***

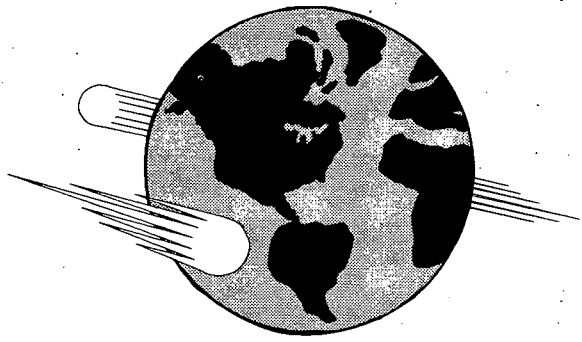
For years, educators have used many famous and obscure science fiction tales to help enliven difficult topics. A chemistry teacher might illustrate part of her curriculum with a classic Hal Clement novel. Social studies classes might argue the ethical questions raised by Tom Godwin's famous story "The Cold Equations." Sometimes a good fictional portrayal can make that crucial difference, helping a confused student say "*Aha, now I get it!*"

Today's technology can help teachers and web designers create vivid materials to brighten any subject, then let them share it with colleagues across the country and around the world. Moreover, this offers one more way to get compelling literature into the hands of young people. . . .

Funded by a cash grant from best-selling author David Brin, *Analog* is proud to announce this exciting new contest, fostering the creation of more tools to help unite a love of good fiction with a passion for learning.

Please help spread the word! This contest is aimed at generating resources that will help all kids for a long time to come.

For rules and available supporting materials, see our website at **www.analogsf.com/wow.**



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REQUIEM ANTARCTICA

Jane Yolen and Robert J. Harris

Two-time Nebula winner Jane Yolen is the author of over two hundred books for children, young adults, and adults. Her other honors include the World Fantasy Award, the Mythopoeic Society's award, and the Skylark. Recently she was named one of Smith College's "Remarkable Women" along with Julia Child and Betty Friedan. She lives in Hatfield, Mass., and St. Andrews, Scotland.

Robert J. Harris, fantasy-game maker turned author, has published a number of stories with his wife —Deborah Turner Harris—as well as on his own and with Jane Yolen. With Jane he's also published a young adult historical novel, *The Queen's Own Fool*. Together they are working on a YA series for HarperCollins called the Young Heros. Born in Dundee, Mr. Harris lives in St. Andrews, Scotland.

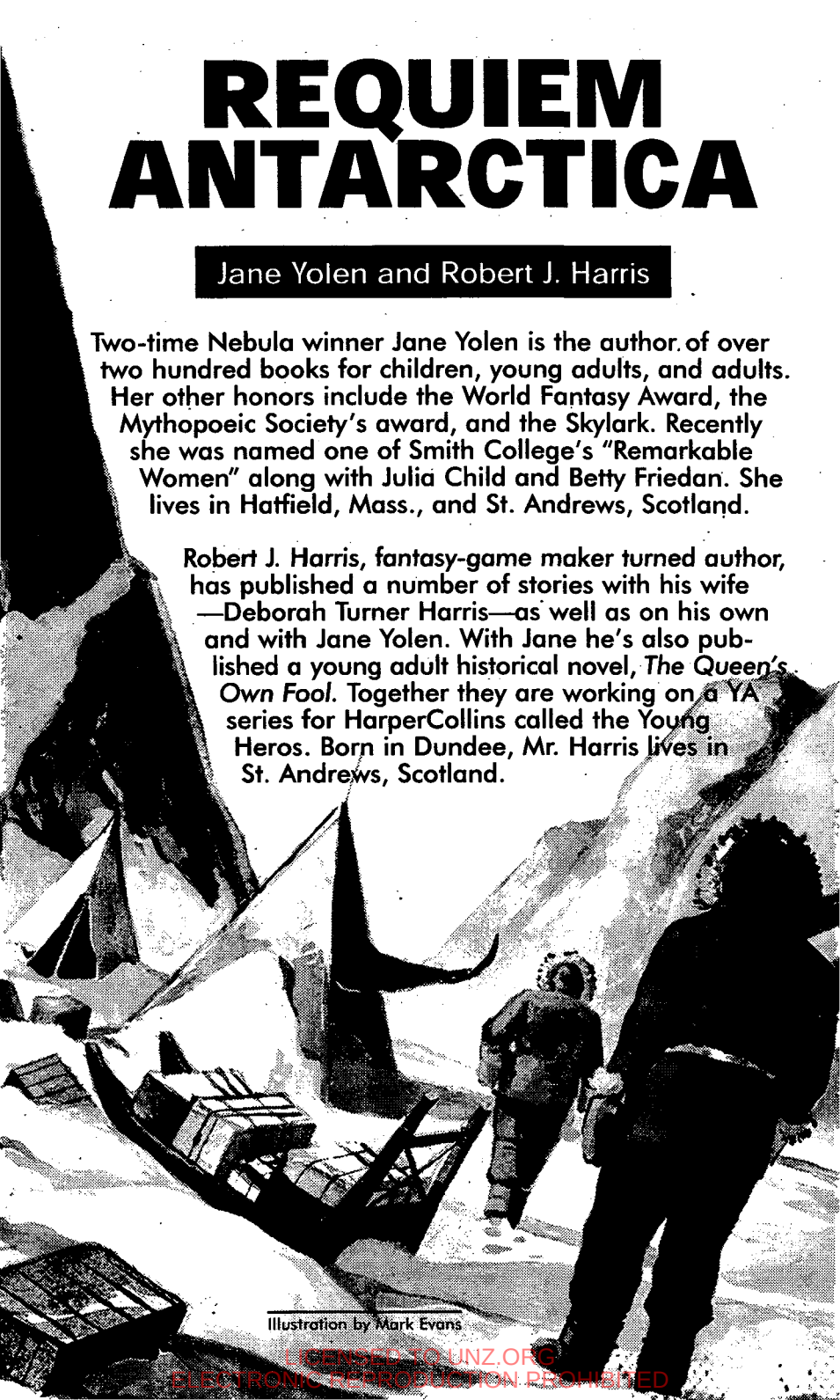

Illustration by Mark Evans

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In 1912 Robert Falcon Scott and four companions attempted to become the first men to reach the South Pole. Beaten to the Pole by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen, all of them perished on the return journey. It was eight months before their bodies were found huddled in a tent. The search party buried them there in the ice and the naval surgeon who examined them refused to divulge any medical details of the Polar party's end. It was a secret he carried with him to the grave.

I suppose a clergyman should be accustomed to keeping God's hours, but I could not help feeling vexed when the doorbell rang that chilly Saturday night. Most of my day had been taken up with a meeting of the deanery, and consequently my sermon for the following morning was still only half-written. If not for my determination to complete my task, I would have been abed some two hours. As it was, my brain was fogged with lack of sleep as I strove to explicate the mysteries of the Resurrection, seeking to do more than simply repeat what I had said the previous year. And—to be truthful—the year before that.

I was sitting in a half-dream when the door chime woke me, ringing like the tolling of a far-away bell. I shook myself out of an unsettling fancy about being summoned to watch spirits rising up from open graves. Pushing myself from my desk, I blinked in the lamplight, and then frowned down at my watch which I had placed on the desk. Near eleven—and the text of the sermon not yet done.

The bell rang again, more insistently this time. I hurried from my study, barely restraining myself from shouting an irked warning to my visitor to show some patience.

I slid back the bolt and opened the door so abruptly that the woman who stood on the threshold took a timid step backward. At once I felt guilty for my own impatience and mustered what I hoped was a conciliatory smile.

In the gloom into which she had retreated she was well disguised, and it took me a few moments to recognize her. She was tightly wrapped in a thick green coat with a scarf bound over her head, for the weather outside was blustery with snow. Her pleasant, round face looked up at me diffidently. She had been at church sporadically over the past few years, but for the life of me I could not recall her name.

"I'm sorry to bother you at such an hour, vicar," she apologized, "but Mr. Atkinson was quite frantic that I bring you."

"It's perfectly all right, I assure you." I wracked my brain for her name. "Perfectly all right." Now it was coming back to me. "God doesn't keep his eye on the clock, Mrs. Marchant," I added experimentally.

Her expression brightened only faintly but it was enough to confirm that I had recalled her name correctly. She was employed as a housekeeper by a Mr. Atkinson who had moved into Bay House about six years ago but had never attended church. He was—I had been reliably told—a retired naval officer, and I had heard someone speak of him as having been something of an explorer in his youth. These days, by contrast, he was evidently so infirm that he was rarely sighted out of doors. I suppose I should have visited the old man before, offering him the consolation of prayer. But when he had first arrived in our village, I had sent over a welcoming letter. There had been no reply. I did not send another. I am not the proselytizing type. I believe that to force oneself on the unwilling only invites disaster. *In God's own time,* is my motto.

"Mr. Atkinson wishes to see me, you say?"

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She nodded, her eyes wide. "He told me I had to come in person and fetch you. He was afraid you wouldn't respond to a phone call."

In fact I think of the telephone as an instrument of God's enemy. It jangles the nerves and never brings anything but the direst of news.

"Are you quite certain it cannot wait until morning, I have, er . . . business." I gestured vaguely toward the interior of the house. "It is very late." And in the morning I would be in church and unavailable, but I did not mention that. Just as I finished speaking, the clock in the hall began its toll.

"Mr. Atkinson is *unwell,*" Mrs. Marchant said. There was no mistaking the genuine anxiety in her voice. The emphasis she laid on that last word implied more than the normal ill health of an invalid. I even detected a trace of a tear welling up in her eye. The natural conclusion was that Atkinson might be dead by morning.

I sighed in what I hoped was a good-natured manner, and signaled her in. Of course I would have to relent. The poor woman had just walked a good two miles to find me in this inclement weather.

"Just give me a moment to fetch my coat."

Relief spread across her face.

As I led her to the back of the parsonage where my car was parked, I had a flickering recollection of the bell in my recent reverie. That sense of being summoned for some extraordinary purpose returned to me with an irrational force that made my hand tremble as I tried to fit the key to the car door. But of course I did not speak of it. The devil is often in dreams. And in loose tongues as well.

Once we were seated and on our way, Mrs. Marchant appeared to relax. She even loosened her head scarf, the way another woman might loosen her stays. I looked back at the road.

"I assume Dr. Landsdale is in attendance?"

The housekeeper shook her head. I could see it from the corner of my eye. "Mr. Atkinson wouldn't allow me to call him," she said, staring off into the night.

"But if he is seriously ill. . . ?" I tried to keep any note of censure out of my voice.

"It was *you* he wanted, vicar, no one else," Mrs. Marchant insisted. She folded her arms about herself as though that gesture signaled an end to our conversation, like a full stop at the end of a sentence.

I decided not to press her. Clearly she was not minded to disobey her employer's instructions, however unreasonable they might seem. But I was determined to assess the situation upon our arrival and take whatever steps I felt necessary to aid the old man, even in the teeth of his own resistance.

Soon a wan yellow light from a pair of tall windows assured me that we were approaching Bay House. The handsome stone building, built around the turn of the century, was situated upon a small rise within sight of the sea whose low tide glimmered dully under the glow of a half moon. I pulled up by the front door, but Mrs. Marchant made no move until I climbed out and opened the passenger door for her. Even so, it was with obvious reluctance that she led me into the house.

In the well-lit vestibule, a ship's barometer upon the wall bore mute testimony to the unseasonable weather. To one side of a nearby doorway a stuffed gull stood upon a shelf, its wings outstretched, its beak agape as if in warning. On the opposite wall was a skillful watercolor painting of the sun rising over a snow-covered landscape.

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Mrs. Marchant took my coat and hung it up, then pointed out the stairway.

"It's the first door facing you when you reach the top," she said. "The door's ajar. Just go right in. He's waiting for you. Can I bring you a cup of tea?"

"Not for the present, thank you." If I were to find myself attempting to argue Mr. Atkinson into accepting medical advice, it might be best for the housekeeper not to walk into the middle of a difficult scene. These old gentlemen can be devilishly reluctant. And the presence of a woman only makes them more so.

I ascended the stairway and, when I reached the open doorway, I could hear the labored breathing from within.

I stepped inside and saw Atkinson laid out in bed under a quilt, his head and shoulders propped up on three plump pillows. His hair was pure white, thick around the sides but with only a few wisps covering his crown. He was clean shaven—thanks, I assumed, to the attentions of Mrs. Marchant—and his features were of a lean, intelligent cast. One eye stared up brightly at me, the other seemed somehow dead, for it did not track as its mate did. What struck me most forcefully, however, was the air of melancholy that hung over him, even in repose. It was my immediate impression that this was not the result of his physical condition, but was a habitual facet of his character.

As I approached the bed, he fixed me with a stare that bespoke a fierce will.

"You are the Reverend Kitson?" he asked. His voice, though tired, was that of a much younger man. In fact, as I got closer, I realized he was not at all the aged seaman I had been led to expect but looked to be in his late forties, though hard living and rough seas, as well as the lingering illness, must have taken a great toll.

I also realized, somewhat latterly, that I had not donned my clerical collar before leaving the house.

"Yes, I am the vicar," I confirmed. "Mrs. Marchant brought me. I wrote to you once."

He smiled, but it did not lift the melancholy that sat on his mouth. "I did not answer."

I shook my head, signifying that it did not matter. Not now.

His head shifted as though he were trying to nod in response, but was impeded by the pillows. "Mrs. Marchant is a good woman," he said, "and I will not let her go unrewarded."

I was surprised at the strength and clarity of his voice, which was very much at odds with his debilitated appearance. "I am certain that is not what . . ."

But his hand impatiently stopped my sentence. He had no time, that peremptory wave said, for the niceties of Christian dialogue. I was, I admit, glad of that. I have never been really good at this sort of thing. My parish work includes hospital visits, of course, but I do them with dread.

I moved closer and stretched out a hand that stopped short of touching his arm. "Do you not think we should phone for a doctor Atkinson? You should really . . ."

He interrupted me this time with a savage cough that sent a brief flush to his pale young-old face. "I have had enough of his pills and injections," he rasped. "If death is coming, we should meet it with dignity, not cringing be-

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hind false comforts. All those potions do is to grant us a few extra hours of breath. I was a naval surgeon not so very long ago, and I know of what I speak."

I recovered my composure and said. "I knew you were a naval man, something of an explorer, I heard?" I did my best to sound conciliatory and accommodating. Numbing, even. His violent outburst had caused a visible deterioration in his state, and I did not want to provoke another.

He made no response to my inquiry, but raised a limp arm to indicate a small cabinet by the wall. "Do you drink, Reverend?"

"I take a drop on occasion," I conceded, thinking on the hour. I had forgotten my watch, on the desk by my sermon, but surely it was closing in toward half eleven.

"Then have one now," Atkinson said. "There's a decent brandy in that cabinet that will warm you."

I hesitated, knowing there was still the sermon to complete when I got home again. But before I could decline politely he added, "You'll need a drink if you are to hear me through to the end."

There seemed no sense in upsetting him over so small a matter, so I accepted his offer. Then I pulled a chair up to his bedside and sipped from the modest measure I poured myself. In spite of the circumstances, I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was more than merely decent. I complimented him upon his taste, and this appeared to both amuse and calm him.

"Now that you are fortified against what is to come, we should get down to our business," he said, as if I were there for some sort of settling of a debt. "While there is still time."

"I assume you wish me to hear your confession." It would not be the first time I had heard the deathbed story of a man who had not seen the inside of a church since boyhood. Often what these fellows had to say was all the more poignant for the distance they felt yawning between themselves and their creator. I was good at this part of my vocation; listening was a skill I had been born with, unlike the writing of sermons or parish small talk.

"It is only in part *my* confession," he responded with a hint of irony. "It is another's confession that I must pass on to you, and I promise you will not thank me for it."

I was puzzled by his words, but I took another sip of the brandy and did not challenge him. It was only to be expected that his thoughts should become confused in this final extremity of his life.

"You are acquainted with the tragic consequences of Scott's Antarctic expedition?" he asked.

The question was unexpected, but I answered that, indeed, I was. "Who has not heard the tale of Captain Oates's noble sacrifice and the courageous end of Captain Scott and his men?"

"Yes, there have been several accounts published, but none—not even Scott's own journal—contains the truth," Atkinson said. "That truth has been a burden I have carried to this day. I am haunted by it. I have kept Scott's secret all these years, turning over and over in my mind whether I was doing the right thing by concealing it, or whether it would serve Scott and myself better for the world to know the truth. I have left it till too late to make a decision, so now I have no option but to pass that responsibility on to you. As a man of God, you of all people should know the value of discretion and be able to balance that against the stern demands of truth."

Indeed, I did not know if he had the right vicar for such an undertaking.

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God and truth, discretion and balance were words in my vocabulary of service. But of late I would have been hard pressed to swear I knew what they meant. I was a bit old for a crisis of faith, but in fact it had thrust itself upon me. And the difficulty I was having writing my sermon was but one aspect of the thing. Still, it would not do to say so to Atkinson's face. The man was clearly dying. He needed my help. I did not need his.

So instead I nodded, setting aside the glass of brandy and leaning closer. "I am sure that you have made whatever decisions you thought best at the time. None of us make unflawed choices, but any error can be excused if forgiveness is sincerely sought." That sounded as weak as one of my recent sermons, and I blamed it on the brandy. I vowed not to take another sip till the poor man was done.

"I seek nothing for myself," Atkinson insisted, "not even forgiveness. But this is my last opportunity to discharge a duty that was laid upon me all those years ago. Listen well, vicar—and try to understand."

He closed his eyes briefly—the one good one and the one that was dead—as though gathering his strength. Then his eyes sprang open and he commenced his account, staring at the ceiling all the while. Someone more fanciful than I might have thought he beheld on that white plaster surface the harsh polar landscape that seemed to be haunting him, but not I. I merely waited for him to go on.

"I was not a member of Scott's first Antarctic expedition," he began, "not the one that left in 1900. But I was honored to be chosen as one of the crew of the *Terra Nova,* which set sail upon the second expedition in 1910. The aim of the earlier journey had been exploration and scientific study, but this second voyage, as we all knew, was a quest for the ultimate goal—the Pole itself." He stopped speaking for a minute, and licked his lips.

I gave him a glass of water that was sitting on the bedside table, holding it for him, while he drank two or three sips eagerly. He waited a moment before starting up again.

"Six months after setting sail from England, we landed at Cape Evans. By God, we were all awed by the imposing grandeur of the Great Ice Barrier and the distant mountains that guarded the hidden lands of Antarctica."

"Antarctica," I whispered. It was really a place to conjure.

"It was less than twenty years since man had first set foot upon that continent," Atkinson said, "and its frozen interior was as unexplored as the surface of the moon. In fact," and here he laughed without mirth, "without the benefit of radio, we were so isolated from the rest of the world, we might as well have been on the moon."

"I see your point," I muttered, though I did not entirely.

"The next several months were spent establishing our base and penetrating southward to lay down depots of food and fuel to supply the journey yet to come. It was during this time that we learned of the arrival of Amundsen and his Norwegians at the Bay of Whales. They had traveled south against all expectation with the avowed intention of being the first to reach the Pole."

As, I suddenly recalled, they had. But I said nothing.

"There was no denying the sense of disappointment and resentment we all felt at Amundsen's intrusion, but we were not to be deterred. We were English, after all. Scott asserted vehemently that we still had every chance of beating our rivals in this race."

We were both silent for a moment, considering Scott's words, for hindsight is ever more accurate than foresight.

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Then Atkinson continued. "You may not know this, but Scott was subject to periods of gloomy abstraction. He was so resistant to any criticism of his plans, that any suggestions that ran counter to his expressed intentions were treated as little short of mutiny. I am a naval man, Reverend, so mutiny is not a term I use lightly.

"I was a member of the support party that accompanied Scott on the first leg of that journey, and I doubt if there was one of us who did not hope right up to the last that he would be selected by Scott to join the summit party, those chosen few who would make the final push to the Pole.

"We crossed the frozen surface of the great ice barrier and pushed on up the Beardmore glacier to trek across the mainland of Antarctica itself. I can still hear the sound of the place, the immense stillness broken by an explosive crack—like a fusillade—as the ice responded to its own weight and pressure. There is nothing else quite like it in the world."

He began coughing again, and I offered him more water, but he waved it aside, impatient to be on with his tale.

"It was shortly before Christmas when we made our farewells to the summit party. Scott had chosen Oates, Wilson, Bowers, and Evans. I admit that I was both desolated and relieved at not being part of that group. A sense of foreboding hung over us all as we watched them disappear into the blank emptiness of the interior, but at the time we attributed it to our fear that it might already be too late to beat the Norwegians to our goal."

"As it was," I said.

"As it was," he conceded before continuing. "I returned to Cape Evans where I took command of our base there. The daily routine kept us sane while we waited. But as the weeks went by, we became increasingly anxious about the fate of the summit party. Twice we probed as far south as we dared in the face of biting blizzards, but found no sign of them. Then the Antarctic night set in, and we could do nothing but wait through the long months of a ferocious winter."

Almost unconsciously I shivered, thinking of that place of cold comfort. Or perhaps it was that a midnight draught had come through the bedroom curtains, for the windows overlooked the bay and took the full brunt of the weather. But my tremor passed unnoticed by Atkinson, wrapped up as he was in his story.

"At last," he said, "the sun returned and conditions eased enough for us to set out on a proper search. It was now almost ten months since we had watched Scott and the others disappear into the frigid waste, and we held out no hope at all of their survival. Yet it was still a bitter blow when we sighted their tent drifted up with snow. I was not alone in my melancholy. I saw tears in the eyes of the others as we trudged toward that lonely shelter." His hands sketched the tent as he spoke.

"I ordered camp to be made a little way off while the tent was dug out. I was the first to enter. Of the five members of the Polar expedition only three had even made it this far. Two of them were fully wrapped in their sleeping bags, so that it was necessary to unfasten the bags to identify them. I could scarcely bear to look upon their frozen faces." His good eye closed again but this time the dead one kept staring up, as if gazing on the cold, wasted past.

"Do you wish to rest a moment?" I asked, worried that he had tired himself to no good end. But he once again waved an impatient hand.

"Let me finish," he said. "Let it *all* be finished." And then, as if my very interruption lent him strength, he returned to his tale.

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"Dr. Wilson—whose artistic skills have left such striking images of the polar landscape—lay with his hands across his chest. He looked as though he had merely fallen asleep. Stocky little Bowers, his feet pointed to the door, also appeared to have passed away without pain. I checked them carefully, leaving Scott till the very last. But in truth I was months too late to offer them succor. This was a tomb, and we were the grave robbers. I was careful not to disturb the dead more than I had to, simply ascertaining the manner of their deaths.

"Between them lay our brave commander. He had thrown back the flaps of his sleeping bag and opened his coat, as if inviting the hostile elements to take him. His left hand was touching Wilson's arm, his right was across his own chest. Beneath the fingers of that hand, I saw an envelope. It was kept separate from the other letters that were laid out on a ground sheet nearby. The name inscribed on the envelope was my own."

"Ah," I said and, all unthinking, took a sip of the brandy. But my exhalation did nothing to stop the flow of Atkinson's story. He went on.

"Gently I pulled the envelope loose of the frozen body. Some indefinable instinct prompted me to conceal it in my pocket before I invited the others to enter—one by one—and bear witness to that tragic scene. We had been comrades to these dear, dead men. It was mere chance that they—and not we—had met eternity in this cold place. I left the others to their own thoughts, and retired to a spot well away from that awful tent, where I might open the envelope Scott had left for me and read the many pages he had written at the end without the others seeing me weep."

At this point Atkinson ceased his narrative and moved his hand stiffly to reach under the pillow behind him. He pulled out a fat envelope but had not the strength left to pass the thing on to me. I understood his intention and picked it up from the quilt where it had dropped from his enfeebled fingers. The envelope had yellowed, but the name *Edward Atkinson* could still be clearly discerned. The flap was open, but for some reason I hesitated to remove the contents.

"You *must* read it," Atkinson croaked, "otherwise you will have wasted your time—and mine also, which is considerably more precious, there being so much less of it." In spite of his bristling tone, he had clearly exhausted himself by relating his lengthy tale.

I pulled out Scott's letter and began to read it aloud, so Atkinson would know I was bowing to his will. Hearing my voice speaking what were obviously familiar words, he closed his eyes, but I do not think he slept.

My dear Atkinson, (the letter said)

Words cannot express my heaviness of heart over subjecting you to this extra burden when you have just found us in this sad condition. But I have no choice in the matter. Indeed the choice was made for me in London five years ago.

As the wind howls outside the tent, and the men lie dead by my side, I know the time has come for me to tell you all. I have long wrestled with this decision, wondering how great a disservice I do you. I even wondered for a while whether I was making my decision with a clear mind. The bleak desolation of Antarctica induces a singular state of consciousness quite different from that of ordinary life. One's priorities are shifted, attitudes are altered in a way that is imperceptible even to oneself, until one returns at last to the comforts and demands of civilization. I know this well, having lived

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through such shifts before. But you are a man of science. With your instruments you have laid open every secret cavity of the human corpus. If this is a disease—as I believe it to be—of the body and not the mind, who better to understand it than you.

Do I sound the mad man? Do not judge me yet, Atky. Read on, read on.

First I must tell you that while you may rightly grieve for the others, do not do so for me. Of them all, only I have attained the one goal that I truly sought: peace and a final freedom from the curse that has afflicted me for some five years now.

Yes—a curse. A disease *and* a curse. You must understand that or all is lost. If you have ever judged my behavior in this last expedition to have been difficult, even to the point of irrationality, I hope that these revelations will at least shed some light on my state of mind.

It was never my ambition to be an explorer, let alone one who charted the new lands of Antarctica. I was but a simple seaman. However, when Sir Clements Markham singled me out for that first expedition, I saw an opportunity to rise above the humble circumstances of an undistinguished naval career. The benefits proved even greater than I had anticipated. The burdens greater still.

Returning to London after three years in Antarctica, I found myself to be a much sought-after celebrity. I now moved in an exotic milieu of writers, actors, and artists, not just hardened seamen. It quite turned my head, as much as a girl at her first ball. Indeed it was through my celebrity that I met my beautiful Kathleen. It is the one truly good thing I have done in this life. But do not, I pray you, burden Kathleen with what I am about to impart. Let her think me dead a hero. Only you will know otherwise. And—in this wild waste where I stay—I will know it as well.

Now to get to the meat of the matter. My cursed disease. It began in London, of that I am sure. Having led a conventional, perhaps even dull, life before—even as a seaman I'd not resorted to low pubs and lower women—I found it difficult to resist the allures of a more Bohemian existence, especially with my dear wife newly pregnant and unable to go out with me even to the more staid parties. Time after time, after she had retired early to bed, I would frequent areas of London I might once have shunned for fear of embarrassment or scandal.

What precisely occurred on the night that altered my fate so completely I have never been able to recall. Was it an infection I contracted from some whore? A mania passed on by tainted meat? Was I bitten by a mad dog? Raked by a rusty blade? Poisoned by some foreign tincture? Your surgeon's knife might have uncovered the seat of the infection. But five years on, discovering it would be like arguing First Causes with a Jesuit—fascinating but beside the point. Whatever it was that set me on this dark path is all lost in the miasma of those London rookeries. And confused by the great quantity of rum I had drunk with my low friends.

All I *do* know is that I found myself staggering down a deserted, muck-covered street in the early hours of the morning, my head pounding and my eyes curiously unfocused. I was also plagued by a peculiar thirst so intense that my throat was actually aching with it.

It was here that I was approached by a drunken vagrant begging for money. I tried to push my way past him, for he was a noxious, smelly brute, but he persisted in blocking my path.

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"Guv'nor?" he said, his hand in my face.

It enraged me. *Enraged* me.

I do not speak here, Atkinson, of anger, or even a momentary spasm of annoyance, but of a pure, unreasoning rage.

Now as a very young man I had been known for my quick temper, but in later years I had mastered such outbursts. Now, however, I was possessed by a rage such as I had never before experienced. I trembled with it, like a tree in a fierce storm. Seizing hold of the raggedy man by the front of his filthy shirt, I hauled him down onto the pavement with a speed and savagery he was powerless to resist. Before I could understand what was happening, I found myself with my teeth at his throat, sucking away his life's blood.

My horrible thirst quenched by this ghastly infusion, my head was finally cleared sufficiently for me to recoil in horror. The man lay under me, the side of his throat torn as if a wild beast had ravened there. Instinctively I wiped a hand across my mouth in an effort to erase the taste. My childhood squeamishness at the sight of blood briefly reasserted itself and, for a moment, I thought I was going to vomit right then and there.

I was sure I had killed the man and wondered what I was to do with the corpse. I knew no one would miss him. He was but a piece of filth. And there was no one else on the street to decry my deed. But to take him in my arms, to drag him to some smaller back alley—I did not know if I had the strength for it.

While I was thinking what to do, the man moaned piteously and I reeled back, more shocked than before. His eyelids began to flutter, like a girl at her first assignation. It appeared that he had merely swooned and was even now beginning to recover. I turned and ran from the scene as fast as my legs would carry me.

Upon my return home I cleaned myself up and made weak excuses for my evening's absence to dear, trusting Kathleen. It took all the composure I could muster to make it through that day, but by the end of it I was prepared to believe that what had occurred—however shocking—had been an isolated incident brought on by too much rum and base companionship, and that it would never repeat itself.

My shallow optimism was soon cruelly dashed. Within a day I felt once again the stirrings of that unnatural appetite and nothing I could do could stop me from feeding again.

Had I been a religious man I might have prayed for the curse to be lifted. I might have sheltered in a church and begged forgiveness from a priest. As it was, I had nothing but my own will with which to resist the dreadful craving. I put great store by my own powers. I should not have been so self-satisfied.

I succeeded for five days in resisting the thirst, much of those days spent in a state of isolation. I explained that I had a fever I did not wish to pass on to the other members of my household, especially to Kathleen in her delicate condition. Kathleen wanted to call a doctor, but I persuaded her that none was required.

I wrestled with my affliction, feeling it burn in my veins like hot mercury. My throat was parched beyond endurance and no amount of water or other liquid seemed to bring any relief. Brandy, port, tea, even sweet possets that cook sent up to me only made the thirst greater. I suffered alone, constantly pacing my room, and wearing out a pair of bedroom slippers in the five days of my torment.

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I now believe that I might have cured myself had I been committed then to a cell. If I had allowed myself to be locked away before I took a second draught of that unnatural drink, the thirst—like a fever—might have burned itself out. But it was not to be. I relied on my will—and my will failed me.

When on the fifth evening I found myself standing over my dear Kathleen as she slept in her own room, my gaze lingering upon the vein that pulsed in her neck, my will at last broke. I rushed into the street, still in my dressing gown and second best pair of slippers, and ran off into the night. I sought out once again those disreputable quarters of the city where I might pass unnoticed at that benighted hour, even dressed as I was.

I came upon a stray dog sniffing in the gutter and, in a vain hope, I grabbed hold of it and sank my teeth into its scrawny neck. With a choke of horror and distaste I flung the animal aside. Its blood was like bile, burning and bitter, but more bitter still was the revelation that only another human being could provide me with the sustenance I craved.

I staggered into a darkened alleyway, pale and trembling, as the thirst racked my body. The sound of footsteps made me suddenly alert and—more like a wild animal than a man—I concealed myself in the shadows.

A London bobby passed by on his nocturnal beat. It was a mark of my desperate state of mind that the presence of the law did not frighten me in the least. I rushed upon him from behind and struck him down with one frenzied blow. He did not rise again.

Such was the extremity of my thirst by this time that it was all I could do to restrain myself from draining him utterly. I left him unconscious but alive and skulked off into the darkness, shamed by the bestial satisfaction I felt.

Although I had heard of men behaving as I did, it had only been in those horrific myths and legends and novels by hack writers who pandered to the basest tastes. And those stories were all vastly inconsistent with my own circumstances. I suffered no discomfort in the full light of day nor did I experience any of the other symptoms the popular imagination attributes to such a condition. My incisors did not grow long and pointed. My appetite for garlic was undiminished. I needed no home soil for comfort. There was only this awful, damnable thirst that only one horrid wine slaked.

Please understand, Atkinson, that I was entirely possessed by this cursed disease. Only when the thirst was satisfied, could I then act like any other man—eating and drinking and, to my shame, making love with the passion of a boy. But the thirst grew, and I had to satisfy it more often. Still, I took great care only to prey in the dark alleys and rookeries of London, where the unwashed and unwanted lived. I did not ever again drink from those folk whose lives were productive and regular. In this way, for a while, I excused myself as some sort of Grim Reaper, inflicting fear and pain only on those who deserved it. But in my saner moments I knew this to be untrue.

At last I understood that there was but a single course of action open to me if I was to preserve the honor of my family. So, I filled a bathtub with hot water, and still in my dressing gown, climbed in. With two quick strokes of my shaving razor, I sliced open my veins at the wrists. The pain was but a moment, and then I slipped down under the water, the front of my gown rising and opening like the petals of a dark flower in the spreading red rain.

"Come death," I thought, and for the first time in months was at peace.

Nothing you have ever experienced can give you any inkling of the terror

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that possessed me when I awoke some time later, awash with my own blood, to find that I yet lived. I glanced down at my wrists, and saw that the wounds had healed themselves to such an extent that there was not even a visible scar.

I gripped the sides of the bath and clenched my teeth tight against the scream of anguish that tried to rip itself from my throat. But no sooner had my initial shock subsided than I became aware that the dread thirst was flaring up in me worse than I had ever felt it before, due—I had to believe—to the massive exsanguination I had forced upon myself.

I hauled myself out of the bath, left the ruined gown on the floor, and hurriedly washed off all traces of the crimson which stained my body. Dressing with all haste, I ran from the house leaving all goodness, morality, and will behind.

The rest of that night remains a blank to me, a merciful veil having been drawn across my memory by the bestial craving that had me in its grip. All I know is that by morning my thirst had been assuaged. I came home unseen, cleaned up the bathroom and washed my own dressing gown. But for the curse itself there appeared no possibility of a cure. Even death—it seemed—would not have me.

What fate could I possibly subject myself to? It had to be something so destructive as to render reanimation impossible. But there was nothing my disordered mind could think of. The prospect of recovering consciousness in some hideously dismembered state was even more terrifying and repugnant than the thought of continued life under the shadow of this affliction.

It was clear to me that until I could find a solution, I needed to devise some means whereby I could carry on my life without posing a threat to those whose good will meant so much to me. In a city such as London, there are women who will perform almost any service if adequately recompensed, and I had little trouble finding one suitable to my purpose. I shall call her Marie. Her real name does not matter in the slightest, and she was well paid for what I had her do. Better, in fact, than had I used her in the usual fashion.

Marie gave me the impression that—bizarre as my needs were—this was not the most repellent behavior she had been party to. Feeding sparingly, I learned that two or three visits with her per week were sufficient to prevent any uncontrollable outbursts of savagery on my part, at least in the beginning. Marie suffered no harm as a result of my . . . desires. And—to my even greater relief—she showed no sign of becoming contaminated with this dreadful infection herself. However, the shame of it all, the constant need for secrecy, and the knowledge of the irreparable harm it would do my family if the truth were ever exposed, all preyed horribly on my mind.

Consequently a brooding self-abhorrence came to dominate my waking hours. I found that I could not longer abide the sight of my own reflection in a mirror. Images of death struck me with a painful force that compelled me to avert my gaze from gazettes and books. Paintings in the museums—where Kathleen loved to walk with me—became abhorrent if they were about war or martyrdoms. And crowds—crowds were intolerable, for it was as though I could hear the very blood coursing richly through the veins as people pressed about me, upsetting the stability I strove so hard to achieve with my visits to Marie.

With each passing day it became more and more difficult to maintain a semblance of normal behavior. The birth of my son only exacerbated my gloom. His innocence threw into grotesque relief my own ever-present guilt.

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I began to see that the only faint glimmer of hope I had was in mounting a second Antarctic Expedition. The aim of this journey was not merely to map and study, but to attain the greatest goal of all exploration—the South Pole itself. Perhaps there amid the most intense cold to be found anywhere on earth, the heat of my unnatural thirst might be cooled.

I became obsessed with the grave site at Cape Adair where Hanson, the naturalist with the earlier Southern Cross party, had been buried. His was the only grave on that vast continent. I thought that I, too, might find the rest I longed for there at the frozen center of a bloodless land.

The task of raising finance for the expedition was both wearisome and frustrating, but I threw myself into it with a fierce energy and at last we were set to go. Kathleen already spoke of me as if I were a hero. I could not disabuse her of the notion. So I said nothing more.

We set sail on the *Terra Nova,* and while the others had their hopes set on the Pole, mine were set on peace. The close confines of the ship forced me into an unavoidable proximity with the other men, but fortunately the lowering temperatures did, indeed, temper my unnatural hunger. Tempered—but did not entirely destroy the thirst.

I was able to limit myself to only a fortnightly indulgence, using three different sources so as not to over-weaken any one. I carried out my drinking during the hours of sleep, having by this time become well practiced at taking my guilty sustenance with a delicacy that left only the barest physical trace, and even this would fade in the course of a day. I never drank from the same man twice in a month. Any debilitating effects experienced by my comrades were thus attributed to the climatic conditions and our restricted diet.

Even you, my dear Atkinson, had my lips on your neck and never knew it. Your blood is a trifle sweet, more a Chianti than a cabernet.

The details of the trek to the Pole I have recorded in the diaries you will find in the green wallet under my bag. I have made every effort to be as truthful as possible while omitting those matters I am entrusting to you alone. I am sure you wondered why I decided to take an extra man on that last leg when we had originally planned for only four. By that time it had occurred to me that if the center of Antarctica were to prove my final resting place, then an extra man would be needed to haul the sleds on the return journey. I could not—of course—reveal my reasoning to anyone else, but here, now, you have it.

There was controversy about whether or not we should use dogs or men for the pulling, and I confess that my resistance to the use of dogs may have been colored by the incident I have already related to you, when I tried to drink from a beast rather than a man. Having dogs along made me terribly uncomfortable to the point of nausea. And having along extra men for the work meant that I would need to visit individuals fewer times for my cursed drink.

My companions were the best of men, and I hoped that we might yet beat Amundsen in the race for the Pole, both for their sake and for those we had left at home. For my own part, that goal had become secondary, for every step we took deeper into the vast, cold, bleakness, the raging heat of my thirst cooled still further.

In the end, while I shared my crew's disappointment when we found the Norwegian flag and the note from Amundsen waiting for us, it was for me

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but a small distress. For there at the center of the bleak, cold world, I found myself without hunger or thirst or the raging blood that had plagued me for so long.

Here, I thought, *here is where I shall stay.*

I was already composing a letter to my dear Kathleen in my head. It was full of celebration and hope, even as it was a letter of farewell.

However, Amundsen's note drained the spirits from the men. Even seaman Evans, from whose simple good humor I had drawn such strength along the way, seemed drastically affected.

The men scarcely spoke to one another and took no joy in the fact that they had made it that far, an accomplishment in itself.

I feared that the mental oppression that was settling upon them might well spell their doom. The way back was to be made even more difficult with no sense of honor and reward at the end of the journey. Only the utmost determination can overcome the pitiless savagery of the Antarctic wastes, and the crew had lost that determination by coming in far second to the Pole.

I knew then that I would have to revise my plans. I could not—as I had so hoped—simply disappear into the vastness, sinking beneath the next fall of enveloping snow, my body frozen by the plunging temperatures of the Antarctic winter. I had to do all I could to lead these brave men to safety. Only then would I be free to make my way alone back into the icy embrace of the Antarctic. If I could turn them over to your good hands, Atkinson, I knew my work would be well done. Well done indeed.

But as you are reading this, you know all too well that the return journey proved even more of a trial than I had feared. The weather rapidly grew worse and we found our way blocked by yawning fissures and huge drifts.

Tragically it was Evans, that cheerful work horse of our party, who was the first to succumb. The physical ravages of frostbite that assailed him were only the beginning. It soon became clear to us all that his mind had become affected. His fearful babblings did little good for the morale of the others. As we made our laborious way across the glacier on dwindling supplies, Evans' lucid periods became fewer and fewer, until he was at last incapable of proceeding.

To haul him on one of the sledges would slow us to such an extent that the party's fate would inevitably be sealed. I knew that it was up to me to end his suffering and give the others a fighting chance for survival.

So that night, while the party slept, their snores punctuating the sentence I had passed on young Evans, I crept over to him and lay down by his side. I put my gloved hands on either side of his face and gently turned it from me for I could not bear to watch him while I drank. He sighed once, like a child, as my teeth razored his neck, but he did not otherwise wake. Silently I drank my fill.

As far as the others were aware, Evans had simply passed away from the effects of frostbite and the injuries he had sustained on the journey. But I could see in their faces that they could not help but be relieved that they were no longer faced with the awful choice of leaving him behind or dooming themselves by dragging him along. You must believe me, Atkinson, I did it for them, not for myself. The thirst was never the reason for his death, though I gained much strength thereby.

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We were now four weeks out from the Pole and our progress had been depressingly slow. We pushed on and on against driving snow, our gear steadily more icy and difficult to manage. One by one we all became victims of the cruel cold and subject to bouts of snow-blindness.

While Wilson and Bowers did all they could to keep up the spirits of the party, Oates subsided into gloomy silence. His feet were swollen with frostbite and his old war wounds flared up under the hardship. Such was his agony that he was too enfeebled to help with pulling the sledges; it was all he could do to keep himself moving. In the tent he sat sullenly and stared at me. It was as clear to him—as it was to the rest of us—that he was not going to make it much further.

He drew me outside on the pretext of examining a damaged runner on one of the sledges, but we had no sooner shut the flap behind us than he took hold of my arm and yanked me well out of the hearing of Wilson and Bowers who were still inside the shelter.

"I know what you think," he said in a voice that was as cold and thin as the wind whipping around us. "You think I'm done for and that I'm going to drag the rest of you down with me."

I tried to give him some reassurance, but he paid no heed to my words. His eyes burned with a feverish emotion and his voice rose in pitch.

"I saw what you did to Evans," he said. "I was not sleeping as you supposed. If not for the fact that the others have enough to contend with already, I would expose you for the foul creature you are."

I was so staggered both by this unexpected revelation and by the vehemence of his words that I was still gaping when he flung himself upon me and began to rain blows upon my head. For a man who had had trouble moving before, he was remarkably able.

"I will not go down so meekly!" he cried, and as he continued his assault, he hurled all manner of abuse at me which it would be fruitless and distasteful to repeat.

I had no option but to defend myself, striking back at him with all my might. The unthinking rage that had possessed me upon previous occasions rose up now, and I beat him viciously, pounding at him until there was no further resistance. By the time the red haze had faded from my eyes and I could think clearly again, he was dead.

I was panting from the exertion as I realized that I could not tell Wilson and Bowers the truth. Their morale was already at a low ebb. They would need every ounce of courage they could muster if I were to lead them back to safety.

I dragged Oates's body away, without even taking time to drink his blood, and buried him beneath the snow. Then, with my coat, I painstakingly brushed aside all signs of our struggle.

When I returned to the tent I told them that Oates—painfully aware of his condition and the fact that he was a burden on the rest of us—had followed a brave and honorable course. He had taken me aside to tell me what he planned to do, exacting a promise not to follow him. Then he had walked out into the icy waste to face his death in lonely dignity.

Neither Wilson nor Bowers questioned my tale, and indeed there was little reason for them to do so. Oates was a soldier, a proud man who had been wounded in battle, and it was entirely in keeping with his character that he would sacrifice himself for the good of his comrades. I promised Wilson and Bowers I would write of Oates's sacrifice in my journal, so that it would not

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be forgotten. The words that I placed in his mouth were these: "I am just going outside and may be some time." You will agree, I am certain, that they have a noble ring.

We continued as best we could, hoping to reach the next depot before our already meager rations gave out. After only a few days, however, the most severe blizzard yet descended upon us, cutting off the wan sunlight and trapping us inside our tent. Even if we had had the strength to push on, we would have been hopelessly lost in the blinding storm.

It was obvious that the end was not far off. Wilson had long ago given up his diary and Bowers made only desultory meteorological notes, but now we commenced writing letters to the colleagues and the dear ones we would soon be leaving behind.

Once this task was done, my friends had nothing left to fortify their minds against the darkness that was coming upon us. Frostbite and cold kept them in constant discomfort. They wept at the thought of their families, and this so unmanned them, that they were in mental agony as well.

So I gave them the only gift I had left to give. While they slept fitfully, I granted them a quiet death by draining away their life's blood. In doing so I also gained for myself the sustenance I needed to see me through a few more days so that I could write this final testament.

Was it merely bad luck that stopped us here? Or is this place my destiny? I no longer believe in God, but I do believe that some awful Providence is clearly at work. I was not meant to return to even so remote an outpost of civilization as Cape Evans for—I am now sure—had I reached there, my bestial thirst would have erupted again. And in that place, so unlike London's dark rookeries, some dreadful incident would have exposed my awful secret. And then my dear Kathleen and my poor son would have borne the brunt of my dishonor.

Bury us all here together, Atkinson, and let us not be disturbed. Resist all attempts to bring us home. Say what you will—that this is a magnificent cathedral for our burial, or that it is fitting we stay here where we strove so hard against the elements. Only do not let others—even Kathleen—convince you to take our bodies back. As long as the ice has me in its grip, I am at peace. I have made my farewells in the other letters you see here, but I could not leave this tale untold. What you do with it is for you to decide, though I beg you to consider first and foremost my wife and son and their welfare.

Perhaps the truth should simply be allowed to die, but as the Antarctic wind howls outside, clawing at our little tent with its talons of ice, I pass this account on to you in defiance of mortality and the crushed hopes of a doomed expedition.

My last hope is that you will forgive me.

Yours ever sincerely,

R. Scott.

When I had finished reading the letter I saw that Atkinson was regarding me with an almost pitying stare.

"It is . . . incredible," I said, only too aware of the inadequacy of my words.

"When I read it that first time I thought so as well," Atkinson agreed. "I could only assume that Scott's mind had been unbalanced by the hardships of the journey and the deaths of his comrades. However, when I returned

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alone to his tent and examined the bodies of Wilson and Bowers, I found their condition to be entirely consistent with Scott's description of their end. They were drained of blood. And Scott's own body was what convinced me of the truth."

"What do you mean?"

"I could see now that his features were noticeably less disfigured by the eight months of winter than those of his companions. I took off my glove and touched my fingers to his frozen cheek. To my horror his eyes immediately began to move beneath the closed lids, as though he were experiencing a dream. His cracked lips parted, and he uttered two words in a dry whisper: 'Leave me!'

"I fled the tent and struggled to master myself lest any of my comrades suspect that something was amiss. The only conclusion I could draw was that the warmth of my touch, the blood beating beneath the pads of my fingertips, had been sufficient to rouse Scott momentarily from his frozen slumber."

I suppose my jaw had dropped during the last ot this recitation, though Atkinson was not done yet.

"I carried the watches and documents from the tent, removed the poles and collapsed it. We built a cairn of stones over the bodies and I read the burial service. We left for home, letting the Antarctic ice cover the grave and leaving Scott to the rest he so earnestly longed for."

As he finished his dreadful tale, Atkinson had become agitated. His face was reddening and there were tears in his weary eyes.

"But . . ." I said to Atkinson, "what you tell me is insane."

"I am a man of science; Reverend," Atkinson said. "And I believe it. Can not you—a man of God—believe it, too?"

I shivered and looked away. For all that I spoke daily of God—and the devil—I still had great moments of doubt. But this strange confession somehow put all disbelief to rout. If this *thing* were true, than what else might be so? The miraculous birth, the even more miraculous Resurrection? I turned back, to thank the dying man for giving me back my faith, but he had one thing more to say.

"What haunts me most is this, Reverend," Atkinson said, and with some last miracle of strength, he sat bolt upright in the bed. "By his own testimony Scott cannot truly die. He merely sleeps beneath the Antarctic ice, his thirst dormant. But what climatic changes might occur in millennia yet to come? In some distant age, the polar ice melted, might he not rise again to haunt an unrecognizable world, to feed a thirst grown gigantic over a thousand frozen centuries?"

Atkinson's distress had now reached such a pitch that his body was shaken by violent convulsions. I seized him by the shoulders only to feel him slump into my arms.

"God will not allow that, my son," I said.

I settled him back down against the pillows and saw that the tranquility of death had overcome him at last. But my own new-found tranquility was forever shattered.

It had never occurred to me that there might be more than one kind of Resurrection. But what Atkinson, in his dying horror, had proposed was exactly that—a devil's resurrection. It was an unsettling, hideous, corrupting thought.

I would never, I supposed, finish that sermon now. O

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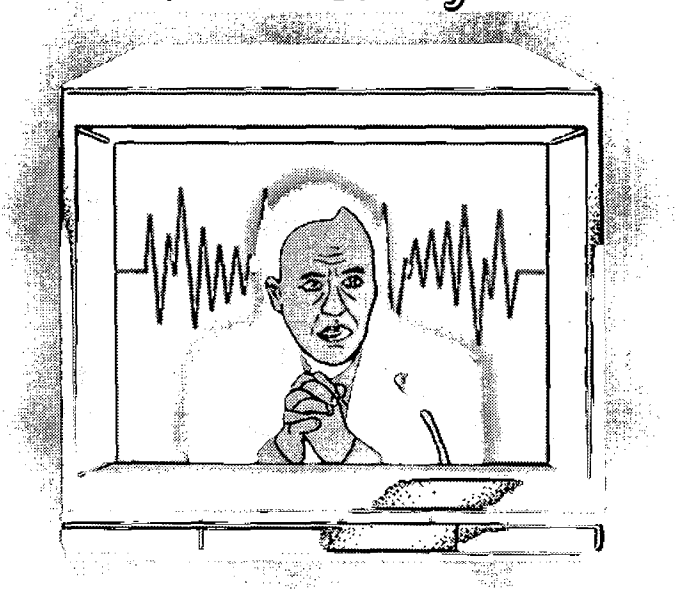
John Alfred Taylor



CALAMITY OF SO LONG LIFE

Beware: Once you read John Alfred Taylor's new story you may never be able to sit comfortably through a news program again.

You wake confused, into pain. Hints of light, shards of color.

Memory returns in fragments: your first shocking taste of Chinese mustard, flying into Logan from England one afternoon, green leaves around you when you were four and lost in the woods, the crooked smile of a girl you cared about in high school, the way Dr. Norris looked at you through his glasses before he told you the results of the last biopsy.

You realize you're being breathed, not breathing. Your eyes sting, the only taste is dust.

Then you remember who and what you are. Your mouth opens, to groan wordlessly as a beast's maw. A mist is sprayed into the desert cavity and you half-choke. More mist, and you can swallow.

And your eyes open, wet with artificial tears. Through the blur you see your handler holding the spray, somebody with brown hair, nobody you recognize. "Good morning, Professor Petrie."

"Wa-ter," you croak between the rhythm of the mechanical lung, "wa-ter," and he holds a container with a bent straw up to your lips. You drink long and thirstily, nod when you're finished so he can lift it away.

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Breathing is a reflex, but taking control of your breathing demands conscious effort, especially since the bellows of the lung is where your legs used to be. You blink your eyes, then feebly lift your arm to dab them clear before you ask "What's the date?"

"October 8, 1998."

Almost three years since the last time they needed your expertise. "Bosnia again?"

"Naw, a place called Kosovo."

"Oh. How long do I have for my briefing?"

"Couple of days. Supposed to be on tomorrow night. Want anything more before I start the tapes?"

"Yes. Breakfast of course. A croissant with unsalted butter, hot tea—Earl Gray please—no sugar, no milk, no lemon—and a large glass of chilled orange juice." Not that you need it, but they've left you a rudimentary digestive system, and eating's one of your few remaining pleasures.

"Be ten, fifteen minutes."

"Splendid."

The brown-haired man turns back toward you on his way out. "By the way, Doc, my name's Simmons. Mark Simmons."

"Pleased to meet you," you say.

Then you're alone, Professor Emeritus James Rhodes Petrie, International Broadcast News' expert on the Country Formerly Known as Yugoslavia. Talking head. Sixty pounds of meat with three hundred pounds of life support.

Alone but not alone, you remind yourself as you look through the glass wall at the next talking head. The lights are dimmed in his cubicle. Slumped in sleep mode, there's even less of him than there is of you, judging from the animatronic body below the neck. You don't know this one's name, or the names of the others barely visible in the cubicles beyond.

Every one of them property of IBN.

The lights are on in a cubicle far down the line. You wonder who that one is, what he's expert in.

Simmons returns with the breakfast tray, clips it to your lower torso. The napkin is linen, the china Royal Doulton, knife and fork and spoon weighty silver. "Anything else, Doc?"

"This is fine, Mark."

"Enjoy." Again he pauses on the way out. "Ring when you're done."

You dismember the croissant, spread butter on a bit, chewing luxuriously, then take a sip of tea. Butter on butter. Bad for you, which is good. Might sludge up what arteries you have left. Simmons will have to dispose of your colostomy bag later. But that's what he's paid for. You lick your lips. Delicious butter.

You should have read the fine print before you signed. Except you did read the fine print, every word. And still signed.

Clever to let Dr. Norris introduce the idea, just after he told you the cancer had metastatized, that it was beyond chemotherapy and radiation. "Though there's one radical possibility," he said and paused, not quite meeting your eye.

You asked "What's that?"

"Cut off what's hopeless and save the rest."

"Freeze my head and hope I get thawed out?"

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"Not cryonics. Life support."

"Nobody can do that," you said. "Maybe someday in the future."

Dr. Norris shook his head. "Not in the future. It can be done, has been done. In the last two years."

"How come I never heard?"

"Not everything gets into the news. Besides the procedure's expensive—enormously expensive."

"Why tell me if I can't afford it?"

"There are people who might consider you a worthwhile investment."

"Really. And how much of me might be saved?"

The doctor rose and walked over to the mounted skeleton in the corner of his office, slashing with his hand to indicate what had to go for you to survive, what parts would be left, till you stopped him to ask whether he called that living.

Norris had smiled without showing his teeth. "Consider the alternative."

You finish your second cup of tea, drop the napkin among the crumbs on the plate. Before you ring for Simmons, you slide the fork into one of the pockets of your utility vest, stack cup and saucer on top of the napkin, hoping he won't notice the fork is missing.

"Everything satisfactory?" he asks as he unclips the tray.

"Very."

"Ready for your briefing?"

"Lay on, Macduff. Just a joke," you reassure him when he stares, "just quoting Shakespeare."

"Whatever you say, Prof."

The instant he's out the door you disengage the brakes of the electric wheelchair, ease over to the corner with the mirror and low-slung washbasin. You wrap the stolen fork in a towel in the lowest drawer, hang your vest on a hook and take off the T-shirt, scrub your face and torso. When Simmons rolls in the cart with the television and VCR you're brushing your teeth.

You put on a fresh T-shirt, slip into your vest, roll back to face the TV. Simmons already has the first tape in, with the rest stacked on the cart beside the set. He hands you the remote. "Anything else you want?"

"Not right now, thanks. I'll ring if there is."

Pulling the desk up and around from the arm of the chair, you open your spiral-bound notebook.

You think about the signing while snow flickers on the screen. Dr. Norris was there in the paneled office, "purely as an observer" he'd explained, along with two solemn IBN lawyers. Dr. Montefeltro had been there too; you met him for the first time then, but became better acquainted with him later. Much better.

You remember how pleased they were that you had no close relatives, and had lost contact with your ex-wife.

You'd read the fine print, all five pages, and then signed the places they told you to, thinking it might buy you a few more years of life.

A few more years!

Then the picture comes on, as usual without a title. Young George Groening making a few preliminary remarks. You know him well, though the two of you have never spoken except on the phone, and wonder if he has his doctorate now. He was All But Dissertation three years ago.

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You haven't been listening, so stop and rewind, begin the tape again, your pen hovering above the page as George outlines the buildup to the current crisis. The picture changes to animated maps, with Groening's voice-over continuing.

This time what seems to be shaping up is the usual: Serbian brutes versus bullyboys calling themselves the Kosovo Liberation Army. The KLO are seriously outnumbered, with Milosevic up to his old tricks. If only the UN had stood up to him in Bosnia—

You watch three of George's videotapes before you break for lunch. Simmons is able to supply pastrami on rye with lettuce and mayonnaise and dark beer.

Then you watch more tapes.

In midafternoon you ring for Simmons again, telling him you'd like tea and a bar of dark chocolate. The chocolate bar is as big as you hoped, and you eat some and hide more in your vest pockets during the next hour.

How did Shakespeare have Hamlet put it?

Ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

When you were already on the rolling gurney with a bag dripping Valium into your forearm, with Dr. Montefeltro walking beside you, you looked up and said "Maybe this can give me a few years."

Montefeltro had grinned in his iron-gray beard. "You might live much longer. Almost forever."

Then you were too tranquilized to react, but the moment kept coming back, especially when you realized Montefeltro wasn't joking. One reason you tried to sound so enthusiastic afterward, wanting to learn everything about your life support system, to the point where Dr. Montefeltro showed you the original CAD printouts. You memorized everything you could, the couplings between your heart and the artificial lung, the lung's intake filters, where your liver and kidneys were now, positions of perfusion pumps, fuses, main circuit board slot, access hatches.

After supper you amalgamate your notes so you know what to ask, then have Simmons bring in a conference phone and dial George Groening. Groening is on retainer to take your calls anytime.

When a woman's voice answers you wonder if George is married now. Then he comes on. "Professor Petrie—thought I'd be hearing from you once I did the background tapes. It's been a long time."

"Three or four years," you say. "And how are you?"

"I have my degree. And a teaching job. Just an adjunct right now, but with a chance for the tenure track." Another reason for him to moonlight for IBN, supplying their expert with his expertise. A week or two's work must bring in more than his annual salary. And tax free, since the transaction has to stay off the books.

You check each question off as he answers it, take a few more notes before you're satisfied, finally tell him "I think that's everything I need."

"You're sure?"

"Thanks to your background tapes. They were very thorough."

"I do my best. Ah, Professor Petrie—"

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"Yes?"

"When will I hear from you again?"

"I have no idea." Then you realize you can't end like this with Groening, and try to sound warmer "Watch for me on IBN soon. And thanks again for so much help. Good night for now."

At eight next morning Simmons brings you out of sleep mode. It's easier this time, more like waking from an ordinary sleep.

You have a bigger breakfast, almost enough for a truck driver, a western omelet, toast, hash browns, orange juice and tea. It's going to be a long day.

You shave carefully when you wash up, then review your notes and Groening's tapes.

After lunch you decide you already have more background than you need, and begin tapping the wire service feeds.

Things seem to be warming up over there. The mixture as before, lots of ethnic fervor plus viewing with alarm and ineffectual internationalism. You wish Marx's witticism about history repeating itself were true, that what was tragedy the first time became comedy the next go-round. Bosnia was bad, Kosovo may be worse.

But you have your own problems.

You dress for dinner. Or rather dress for what comes after dinner, putting on a clean white shirt, letting Simmons adjust your tie while you watch in the mirror.

Dinner's the best you could choose, considering the limited pantry: lobster bisque and mesclun salad, chicken kiev and petite peas for main course (both out of the freezer, Simmons has confessed, but adequate for a last meal).

Finally, and most important, a double helping of chocolate cake.

You keep the napkin afterward, tucking it under your chin so you can brush your teeth a second time. You grip the toothbrush between your lips while pulling out the drawer where you've hidden the fork, open the access door where your waist used to be, and move the fork around in exactly the right place to disable your insulin pump, then hide the fork again.

When Simmons returns, you're brushing away, mouth full of foam.

"A half hour to air time," he announces.

You put on your jacket, carefully smoothing down the lumpy pockets before Simmons straightens it and powders your nose. You back your chair free from the recharging socket, and the two of you trundle out the door. The hall is empty, soundless except for the whine of your motor and the sound of his steps.

The studio at the end is even barer. You slide in behind the podium, raise it hydraulically to hide your lower torso, have Simmons drape the rear of the chair so it won't show up against the neutral backdrop. He goes to stand by the remotely controlled camera to see how you look, nods with satisfaction.

The countdown clock says nine minutes. You send Simmons out to fill the pitcher with fresh water. Keeping one eye on the camera, ready to stop the instant its red eye comes on, you choke down your hoarded chocolate. Your jacket pockets are empty by the time he comes back and puts the pitcher down before you.

You smile gratefully and pour yourself a glass.

Two minutes to air time.

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Simmons powders your nose again.

You slip the tiny earpiece in, clip the barely visible microphone to your tie, plug it into the podium jack.

You feel very tired and thirsty, and drink more water. All according to plan—you've read up on the symptoms of *ketosis*. You hope it happens with the camera actually on you; the resulting confusion should decrease the chances of Montefeltro or a paramedic reaching you in time.

Three years ago you'd toyed with the idea of blurting out the truth about being a talking head when you were on the air, till you learned about the ten-second delay loop that would allow them to stop anything you said before it went any further, then cover the glitch with talk of network trouble.

You'll give them network trouble.

There's a click in your earphone, and the camera's red light comes on. "Just checking the system." The camera turns slightly, right, left, up, down. "Everything works. Crockett says he won't be calling on you for awhile—say ten, fifteen more minutes."

All to the good, if you can last that long. You pour yourself another glass, sipping slowly to control your gathering nausea.

Watching the staring red eye, you wonder where Crockett will claim you're speaking from this time. Last time it was supposed to be Boston, but whatever they say it will always be from right here, transmitted by the uplink dish on the roof.

The big screen over the camera comes on. Crockett and the other anchors seem figures in a dream, the news summary comes from very far away.

You watch the meaningless pictures change as your ketone level rises, involuntarily breathing faster and deeper till you gasp desperately, frightened even though you expected it and know to call it Kussmaul respiration.

If only you can achieve hyperosomolar coma, when your blood thickens like syrup. Final but unlikely, a consummation devoutly to be wished.

You see a map you recognize, then Crockett saying your name on one side of the split screen, your image blurring out of focus on the other as your mouth moves soundlessly, breathlessly, straining to have the last word—

Dr. Montefeltro and lots of ceiling lights are looking down at you. "And how do we feel?"

Speech is an effort. "Feel aw-ful." Not physically, bad as it is, but because you're still alive.

"That was a closie."

"Wha—happen?"

"Something went wrong with your insulin pump."

"Scary." Apparently you've been successful at hiding your tracks, though once you're back in the cubicle you'll have to do something about that fork.

"You'll be right as rain in a day or two," Montefeltro says. "Meanwhile stay informed concerning the international situation. The network needs your expertise."

"Do my best to keep up," you say, thoughts crawling round and round with no way out.

Then you remember your contingency plan. There are warnings on every acetaminophen bottle: an overdose could cause kidney failure. You decide you're going to have lots of headaches.

Hamlet had it easier, you think. He had access to a bare bodkin. ○

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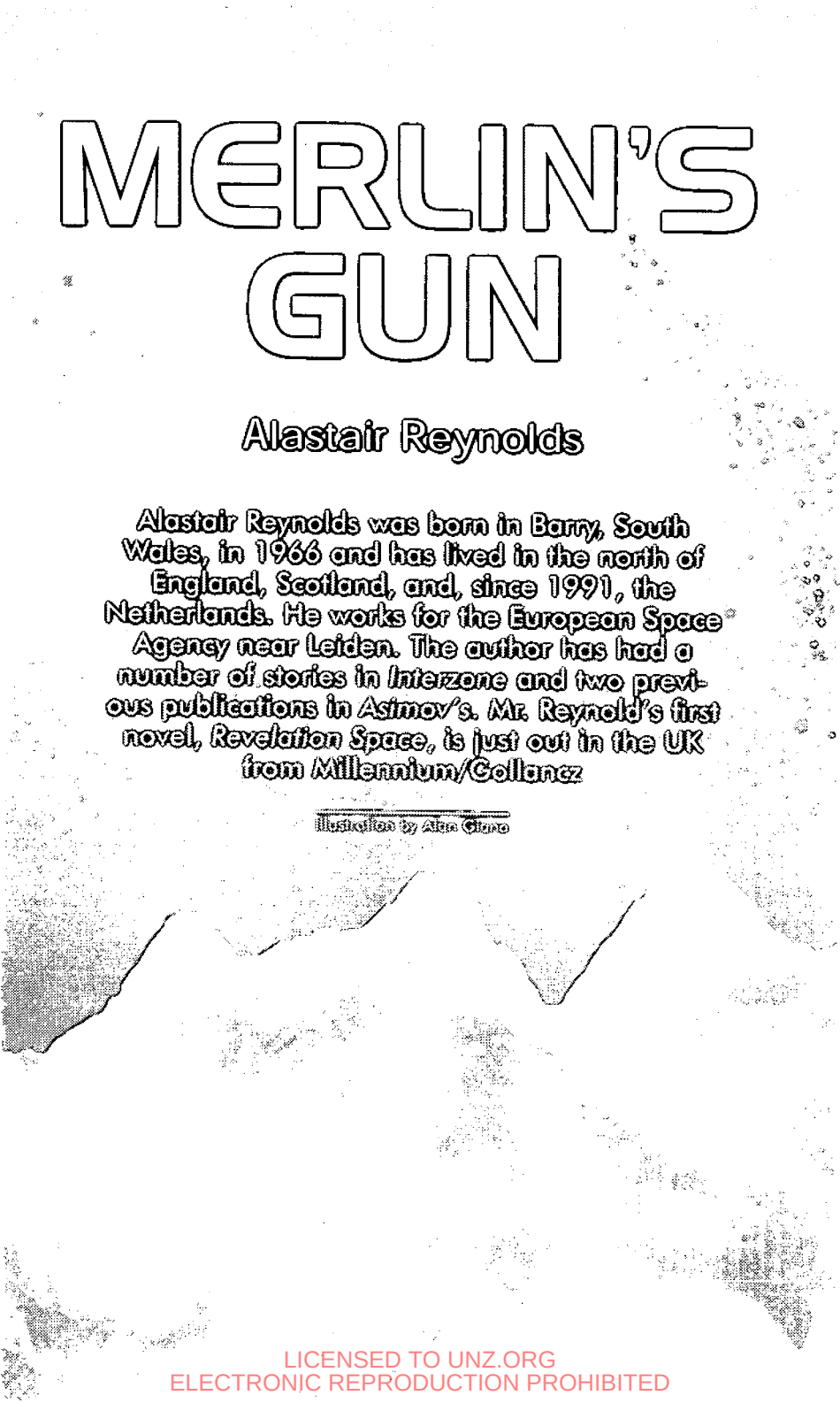
MERLIN'S GUN

Alastair Reynolds

Alastair Reynolds was born in Barry, South Wales, in 1966 and has lived in the north of England, Scotland, and, since 1991, the Netherlands. He works for the European Space Agency near Leiden. The author has had a number of stories in *Interzone* and two previous publications in *Asimov's*. Mr. Reynold's first novel, *Revelation Space*, is just out in the UK from Millennium/Gollancz



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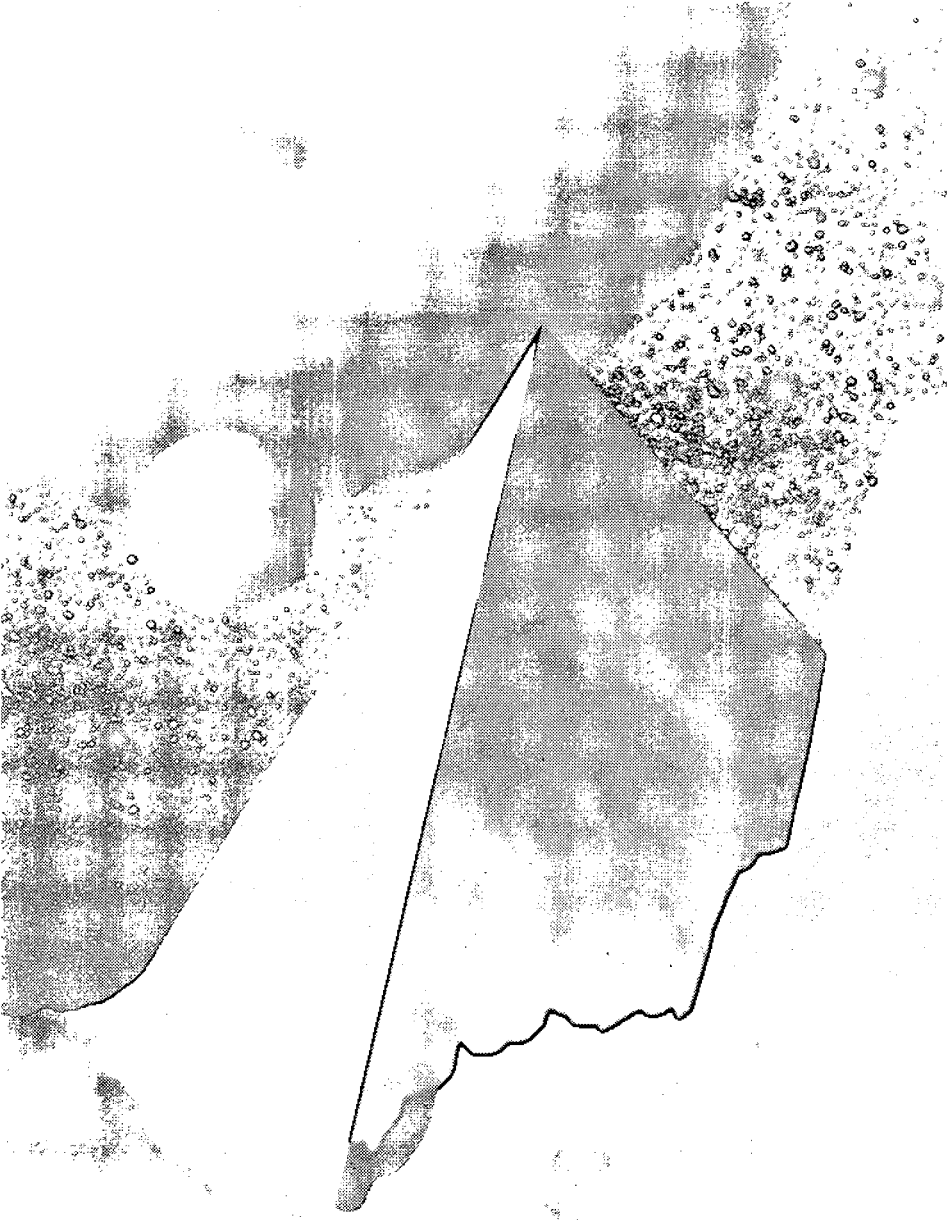

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Punishment saved Sora.

If her marksmanship had not been the worst in her class, she would never have been assigned the task of overseeing proctors down in ship's docks. She would not have had to stand for hours, alone except for her familiar, running a laser-stylus across the ore samples the proctors brought back to the swallowship, dreaming of finishing shift and meeting Verdin. It was boring; menial work. But because the docks were open to vacuum it was work that required a pressure suit.

"Got to be a drill," she said, when the attack began.

"No," her familiar said. "It really does seem as if they've caught up with us."

Sora's calm evaporated.

"How many?"

"Four elements of the swarm; standard attack pattern; coherent-matter weapons at maximum range . . . novamine countermeasures deployed but seemingly ineffective . . . initial damage reports severe and likely underestimates. . . ."

The floor pitched under her feet. The knee-high, androform proctors looked to each other nervously. The machines had no more experience of battle than Sora, and unlike her they had never experienced the simulations of warcreche.

Sora dropped the clipboard.

"What do I do?"

"My advice," her familiar said, "is that you engage that old mammalian flight response and run like hell."

She obeyed; stooping down low-ceilinged corridors festooned with pipes, snaking around hand-painted murals that showed decisive battles from the Cohort's history; squadrons of ships exchanging fire; worlds wreathed in flame. The endgame was much swifter than those languid paintings suggested. The swarm had been chasing *Snipe* for nine years of shiptime, during which time Sora had passed through warcreche to adulthood. Yet beyond the ship's relativistic frame of reference, nearly sixty years had passed. Captain Tchagra had done all that she could to lose the swarm. Her last gamble had been the most desperate of all; using the vicious gravity of a neutron star to slingshot the swallowship on another course, one that the chasing ships ought not have been able to follow, unless they skimmed the neutron star even more suicidally. But they had, forcing *Snipe* to slow from relativistic flight and nurse its wounds in a fallow system. It was there that the swarm attacked.

Near the end, the floor drifted away from her feet as ship's gravity faltered, and she had to progress hand over hand.

"This is wrong," Sora said, arriving in the pod bay. "This part should be pressurized. And where is everyone?"

"Attack must be a lot worse than those initial reports suggested. I advise you get into a pod as quickly as you can."

"I can't go, not without Verdin."

"Let me worry about him."

Knowing better than to argue, Sora climbed into the nearest of the cylindrical pods, mounted on a railed pallet ready for injection into the tunnel. The lid clammed shut, air rushing in.

"What about Verdin?"

"Safe. The attack was bad, but I'm hearing reports that the aft sections made it."

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"Get me out of here, then."

"With all pleasure."

Acceleration came suddenly, numbness gloving her spine.

"I've got worse news," her familiar said. The voice was an echo of Sora's own, but an octave lower and calmer; like a slightly older and more sensible sister. "I'm sorry, but I had to lie to you. My highest duty is your preservation. I knew that if I didn't lie, you wouldn't save yourself."

Sora thought about that, while she watched the ship die from the vantage point of her pod. The Husker weapons had hit its middle sphere, barely harming the parasol of the swallowscoop. Bodies fell into space, stiff and tiny as snowflakes. Light licked from the sphere. *Snipe* became a flower of hurting whiteness, darkening as it bloomed.

"What did you lie about?"

"About Verdin. I'm sorry. He didn't make it. None of them did."

Sora waited for the impact of the words; aware that what she felt now was only a precursor to the shock, like the moment when she touched the hot barrel of a gun in warcreche, and her fingers registered the heat but the pain itself did not arrive instantly, giving her time to prepare for its sting. She waited, for what she knew—in all likelihood—would be the worst thing she had ever felt. And waited.

"What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?"

"Because I'm not allowing it. Not just now. If you opt to grieve at some later point then I can restore the appropriate brain functions."

Sora thought about that, too.

"You couldn't make it sound any more clinical, could you?"

"Don't imagine this is easy for me, Sora. I don't exactly have a great deal of experience in this matter."

"Well, now you're getting it."

She was alone; no arguing with that. None of the other crew had survived—and she had only made it because she was on punishment duty for her failings as a soldier. No use looking for help: the nearest Cohort motherbase was seventy light-years toward the Galactic Core. Even if there were swallowships within broadcast range it would take decades for the nearest to hear her; decades again for them to curve around and rescue her. No; she would not be rescued. She would drift here, circling a nameless sun, until her energy reserves could not even sustain frostwatch.

"What about the enemy?" Sora said, seized by an urge to gaze upon her nemesis. "Where are the bastards?"

A map of the system scrolled on the faceplate of her helmet, overlaid with the four Husker ships that had survived the slingshot around the neutron star. They were near the two Ways that punched through the system; marked on the map as fine straight flaws, surrounded by shaded hazard regions. Perhaps, like the Cohort, the Huskers were trying to find a way to enter the Waynet without being killed; trying to gain the final edge in a war that had lasted twenty-three thousand years. The Huskers had been at war with the Cohort ever since these ruthless alien cyborgs had emerged from ancient Dyson spheres near the Galactic Core.

"They're not interested in me," Sora said. "They know that, even if anyone survived the attack, they won't survive much longer. That's right, isn't it?"

"They're nothing if not pragmatic."

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"I want to die. I want you to put me to sleep painlessly and then kill me. You can do that, can't you? I mean, if I order it?"

Sora did not complete her next thought. What happened, instead, was that her consciousness stalled, except for the awareness of the familiar, thoughts bleeding into her own. She had experienced something like this stalling aboard *Snipe,* when the crew went into frostwatch for the longest transits between engagements. But no frostwatch had ever felt this long. After an age, her thoughts oozed back to life. She groped for the mental routines that formed language.

"You lied again!"

"This time I plead innocence. I just put you in a position where you couldn't give me the order you were about to. Seemed the best thing under the circumstances."

"I'll bet it did." In that instant of stalled thought, the pod had turned opaque, concealing the starscape and the debris of the ship. "What else?"

The pod turned glassy across its upper surface, revealing a slowly wheeling starscape above filthy ice. The glass, once perfectly transparent, now had a smoky luster. "Once you were sleeping," the familiar said, "I used the remaining fuel to guide the pod to a cometary shard. It seemed safer than drifting."

"How long?" Sora was trying to guess from the state of the pod, but the interior looked as new as when she had ejected from *Snipe.* The sudden smokiness of the glass was alarming, however: Sora did not want to think how many years of cosmic ray abrasion would be required to scuff the material to that degree. "Are we talking years or decades, or more than that?"

"Shall I tell you why I woke you, first?"

"If it's going to make any difference . . ."

"I think it makes all the difference, quite frankly." The familiar paused for effect. "Someone has decided to pay this system a visit."

Sora saw it on the map now, revised to account for the new relative positions of the celestial bodies in this system. The new ship was denoted by a lilac arrow, moving slowly between Waynet transit nodes; the thickened points where the Way lines intercepted the ecliptic plane.

"It must have a functioning syrinx," Sora said, marveling, and for the first time feeling as if death was not the immediately preferable option. "It must be able to use the Ways!"

"Worth waking you up for, I think."

Sora had eight hours to signal the ship before it reached the other node of the Waynet. She left the pod—stiff, aching, and disorientated, but basically functional—and walked to the edge of a crater; one that the familiar had mapped some years earlier. Three thousand years earlier, to be precise, for that was how long it had taken to scratch the sheen from the glass. The news had been shocking, at first—until Sora realized that the span of time was not in itself important. All that she had ever known was the ship; now that it was gone, it hardly mattered how much time had passed.

Yet now there was this newcomer. Sora crisscrossed the crater, laying a line of metallic monofilament; doubling back on her trail many times until a glistening scribble covered the crater. It looked like the work of a drunken spider, but the familiar assured her it would focus more than satisfactorily at radio frequencies. As for the antenna, that was where Sora came in: her suit was sheathed in a conductive epidermis; a shield against plasma and ion-beam weaponry. By modulating current through it, the familiar could

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generate pulses of radio emission. The radio waves would fly away from Sora in all directions, but a good fraction would be reflected back from the crater in parallel lines. Sora had to make gliding jumps from one rim of the crater to the other, so that she passed through the focus momentarily, synchronized to the intervals when the other ship entered view.

After two hours of light-transit time, the newcomer vectored toward the shard. When it was much closer, Sora secreted herself in a snowhole and set her suit to thermal stealth-mode. The ship nosed in; stiletto-sleek, devilishly hard to see against the stars. It was elongated, carbon-black, and nubbed by propulsion modules and weapons of unguessable function, arrayed around the hull like remora. Yet it carried Cohort markings, and had none of the faintly organic attributes of a Husker vessel. Purple flames knifed from the ship's belly, slowing it over the crater. After examining the mirror, the ship moved toward the pod and anchored itself to the ice with grapples.

"How did something that small ever get here?"

"Doesn't need to be big," the familiar said. "Not if it uses the Waynets."

After a few minutes, an access ramp lowered down, kissing the ice. A spacesuited figure ambled down the ramp. He moved toward the pod, kicking up divots of frost. The man—he was clearly male, judging by the contours of his suit—knelt down and examined the pod. Ribbed and striped by luminous paint, his suit made him seem naked, scarred by ritual marks of warriorhood. He fiddled with the sleeve, unspooling something before shunting it into a socket in the side of the pod. Then he stood there, head slightly cocked.

"Nosy bastard," Sora whispered.

"Don't be so ungrateful. He's trying to rescue you."

"Are you in yet?"

"Can't be certain." The familiar had copied part of itself into the pod before Sora had left. "His suit might not even have the capacity to store me."

"I'm going to make my presence known."

"Be careful, will you?"

Sora stood, dislodging a flurry of ice. The man turned to her sharply, the spool disengaging from the pod and whisking back into his sleeve. The stripes on his suit flicked over to livid reds and oranges. He opened a fist to reveal something lying in his palm; a designator for the weapons on the ship, swiveling out from the hull like snake's heads.

"If I were you," the familiar said, "I'd assume the most submissive posture you can think of."

"Sod that."

Sora took steps forward, trying not to let her fear translate into clumsiness. Her radio chirped to indicate that she was online to the other suit.

"Who are you? Can you understand me?"

"Perfectly well," the man said, after negligible hesitation. His voice was deep and actorly; devoid of any accent Sora knew. "You're Cohort. We speak Main, give or take a few kiloyears of linguistic drift."

"You speak it pretty well for someone who's been out there for ten thousand years."

"And how would one know that?"

"Do the sums. Your ship's from seven thousand years earlier than my own era. And I've just taken three thousand years of catnap."

"Ah. Perhaps if I'd arrived in time to waken you with a kiss you wouldn't be quite so grumpy. But your point was?

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"We shouldn't be able to understand each other at all. Which makes me wonder if you're lying to me."

"I see." For a moment she thought he heard him chuckling to himself; almost a catlike purring. "What I'm wondering is why I need to listen to this stuff and nonsense, given that I'm not the one in current need of rescuing."

His suit calmed; aggressor markings cooling to neutral blues and yellows. He let his hand drop slowly.

"I'd say," the familiar said, "that he has a fairly good point."

Sora stepped closer. "I'm a little edgy, that's all. Comes with the territory."

"You were attacked?"

"Slightly. A swarm took out my swallowship."

"Bad show," the man said, nodding. "Haven't seen swallowships for two and a half kiloyears. Too hard for the halo factories to manufacture, once the Huskers started targeting motherbases. The Cohort regressed again—fell back on fusion pulse drives. Before very long they'll be back to generation starships and chemical rockets."

"Thanks for all the sympathy."

"Sorry . . . it wasn't my intention to sound callous. It's simply that I've been traveling. It gives one a certain—how shall I say? Loftiness of perspective? Means I've kept more up to date with current affairs than you have. That's how I understand you." With his free hand he tapped the side of his helmet. "I've a database of languages running half way back to the Flourishing."

"Bully for you. Who are you, by the way?"

"Ah. Of course. Introductions." He reached out the free hand, this time in something approximating welcome. "Merlin."

It was impossible; it cut against all common sense, but she knew who he was.

It was not that they had ever met. But everyone knew of Merlin: there was no word for him other than legend. Seven, or more properly ten thousand years ago, it was Merlin who had stolen something from the Cohort, vanishing into the Galaxy on a quest for what could only be described as a weapon too dreadful to use. He had never been seen again—until, apparently, now.

"Thanks for rescuing me," Sora said, when he had shown her to the bridge of the ship he called *Tyrant*; a spherical chamber outfitted with huge black control seats, facing a window of flawless metasapphire overlooking cometary ice.

"Don't overdo the gratitude," the familiar said.

Merlin shrugged. "You're welcome."

"And sorry if I acted a little edgy."

"Forget it. As you say, comes with the territory. Actually, I'm rather glad I found you. You wouldn't believe how scarce human company is these days."

"Nobody ever said it was a friendly Galaxy."

"Less so now, believe me. Now the Cohort's started losing whole star-systems. I've seen world after world shattered by the Huskers; whole strings of orbiting habitats gutted by nuclear fire. The war's in its terminal stages, and the Cohort isn't in anything resembling a winning position." Merlin leaned closer to her, sudden enthusiasm burning in his eyes. "But I've found

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something that can make a difference, Sora. Or at least, I have rather a good idea where one might find it."

She nodded slowly.

"Let's see. That wouldn't be Merlin's fabulous gun, by any chance?"

"You're still not entirely sure I'm who I say I am, are you?"

"I've one or two nagging doubts."

"You're right, of course." He sighed theatrically and gestured around the bridge. In the areas not reserved for control readouts, the walls were adorned with treasure: trinkets, finery, and jewels of staggering artistry and beauty, glinting with the hues of the rarest alloys, inset with precious stones, shaped by the finest lapidary skill of a thousand worlds. There were chips of subtly colored ceramic, or tiny white-light holograms of great brilliance. There were daggers and brooches, ornate ceremonial lasers and bracelets, terrible swords and grotesque, carnelian-eyed carnival masques.

"I thought," Merlin said, "that this would be enough to convince you."

He had sloughed the outer layer of his suit, revealing himself to be what she had on some level feared: a handsome, broad-shouldered man who in every way conformed to the legend she had in mind. Merlin dressed luxuriously, encrusted in jewelry which was, nonetheless, at the dour end of the spectrum compared to what was displayed on the walls. His beard was carefully trimmed and his long auburn hair hung loose, evoking leonine strength. He radiated magnificence.

"Oh, it's pretty impressive," Sora said. "Even if a good fraction of it must have been looted. And maybe I am half convinced. But you have to admit, it's quite a story."

"Not from my perspective." He was fiddling with an intricate ring on one forefinger. "Since I left on my quest"—he spoke the word with exquisite distaste—"I've lived rather less than eleven years of subjective time. I was as horrified as anyone when I found my little hunt had been magnified into something so . . . epic."

"Bet you were."

"When I left, there was an unstated expectation that the war could be won, within a handful of centuries." Merlin snapped his fingers at a waiting proctor and had it bring a bowl of fruit. Sora took a plum, examining it suspiciously before consigning it to her mouth. "But even then," Merlin continued, "things were on the turn. I could see it, if no one else could."

"So you became a mercenary."

"Freelancer, if you don't mind. Point was, I realized that I could better serve humanity outside the Cohort. And old legends kept tickling the back of my mind." He smiled. "You see, even legends are haunted by legends!"

He told her the rest, which, in diluted form, she already knew. Yet it was fascinating to hear it from Merlin's lips; to hear the kernel of truth at the core of something around which falsehoods and half-truths had accreted like dust around a protostar. He had gathered many stories, from dozens of human cultures predating the Cohort, spread across thousands of light-years and dispersed through tens of thousands of years of history. The similarities were not always obvious, but Merlin had sifted common patterns, piecing together—as well as he could—an underlying framework of what might just be fact.

"There'd been another war," Merlin said. "Smaller than ours, spread across a much smaller volume of space—but no less brutal for all that."

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"How long ago was this?"

"Forty or forty five kiloyears ago—not long after the Waymakers vanished, but about twenty kays before anything we'd recognize as the Cohort." Merlin's eyes seemed to gaze over; an odd, stentorian tone entered his voice "In the long dark centuries of Mid-Galactic history, when a thousand cultures rose, each imagining themselves immune to time, and whose shadows barely reach us across the millennia. . . ."

"Yes. Very poetic. What *kind* of war, anyway? Human versus human, or human versus alien, like this one?"

"Does it matter? Whoever the enemy were, they aren't coming back. Whatever was used against them was so deadly, so powerful, so *awesome,* that it stopped an entire war!"

"Merlin's gun."

He nodded, lips tight, looking almost embarrassed. "As if I had some prior claim on it, or was even in some sense responsible for it!" He looked at Sora very intently, the glittering finery of the ship reflected in the gold of his eyes. "I haven't seen the gun, or even been near it, and it's only recently that I've had anything like a clear idea of what it might actually be."

"But you think you know where it is?"

"I think so. It isn't far. And it's in the eye of a storm."

They lifted from the shard, spending eight days in transit to the closest Way, most of the time in frostwatch. Sora had her own quarters; a spherical-walled suite deep in *Tyrant*'s thorax, outfitted in maroon and burgundy. The ship was small, but fascinating to explore, an object lesson in the differences between the Cohort that had manufactured this ship, and the one Sora had been raised in. In many respects, the ship was more advanced than anything from her own time, especially in the manner of its propulsion, defenses, and sensors. In other areas, the Cohort had gained expertise since Merlin's era. Merlin's proctors were even stupider than those Sora had been looking after when the Husker attack began. There were no familiars in Merlin's time, either, and she saw no reason to educate him about her own neural symbiote.

"Well," Sora said, when she was alone. "What can you tell me about the legendary Merlin?"

"Nothing very much at this point." The familiar had been communicating with the version of itself that had infiltrated *Tyrant,* via Merlin's suit. "If he's impersonating the historical figure we know as Merlin, he's gone to extraordinary lengths to make the illusion authentic. All the logs confirm that his ship left Cohort-controlled space around ten kiloyears ago, and that he's been traveling ever since."

"He's back from somewhere. It would help if we knew where."

"Tricky, given that we have no idea about the deep topology of the Waynet. I can search the starfields for recognizable features, but it'll take a long time, and there'll still be a large element of guesswork."

"There must be something you can show me."

"Of course." The familiar sounded slightly affronted. "I found images. Some of the formats are obscure, but I think I can make sense of most of them." And even before Sora had answered, the familiar had warmed a screen in one hemisphere of the suite. Visual records of different solar systems appeared, each entry displayed for a second before being replaced. Each consisted of an orbital map; planets and Waynet nodes were marked

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relative to each system's sun. The worlds were annotated with enlarged images of each, overlaid with sparse astrophysical and military data, showing the roles—if any—they had played in the war. Merlin had visited other places, too. Squidlike protostellar nebulae, stained with green and red and flecked by the light of hot blue stars. Supernova remnants, the eviscera of gored stars, a hundred of which had died since the Flourishing, briefly outshining the galaxy.

"What do you think he was looking for?" Sora said. "These points must have been on the Waynet, but they're a long way from anything we'd call civilization."

"I don't know. Souvenir hunting?"

"Are you sure Merlin can't tell you're accessing this information?"

"Absolutely—but why should it bother him unless he's got something to hide?"

"Debatable point." Sora looked around to the sealed door of her quarters, half expecting Merlin to enter at any moment. It was absurd, of course—from its present vantage point, the familiar could probably tell precisely where Merlin was in the ship, and give Sora adequate warning. But she still felt uneasy, even as she asked the inevitable question. "What else?"

"Oh, plenty. Even some visual records of the man himself, caught on the internal cameras."

"Sorry. A healthy interest in where he's been is one thing, but spying on him is something else."

"Would it change things if I told you that Merlin hasn't been totally honest with us?"

"You said he hadn't lied."

"Not about anything significant—which makes this all the odder. There." The familiar sounded quietly pleased with itself. "You're curious now, aren't you?"

Sora sighed. "You'd better show me."

Merlin's face appeared on the screen, sobbing. He seemed slightly older to her, although it was difficult to tell, since most of his face was caged behind his hands. She could hardly make out what he was saying, between each sob.

"Thousands of hours of this sort of thing," the familiar said. "They started out as serious attempts at keeping a journal, but soon deteriorated into a form of catharsis."

"I'd say he did well to stay sane at all."

"More than you realize. We know he's been gone ten thousand years—just as he told us. Well and good. That's objective time. But he also said that eleven years of shiptime had passed."

"And that isn't the case?"

"I suspect that may be, to put a diplomatic gloss on it, a slight underestimate. By a considerable number of decades. And I don't think he spent much of that time in frostwatch."

Sora tried to remember what she knew of the methods of longevity available to the Cohort in Merlin's time. "He looks older than he does now—doesn't he?"

The familiar chose not to answer.

When the transit to the Way was almost over, Merlin called her to the bridge.

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"We're near the transit node," he said. "Take a seat, because the insertion can be a little . . . interesting."

"Transition to Waynet in three hundred seconds," said the ship's cloyingly calm voice.

The crescent of the cockpit window showed a starfield transected by a blurred, twinkling filament, like a solitary wave crossing a lake at midnight. Sora could see blurred stars through the filament, wide as her outspread hand, widening by the second. A thickening in it like a bulge along a snake was the transit node; a point, coincidental with the ecliptic, where passage into the accelerated spacetime of the Way was possible. Although the Waynet stream was transparent, there remained a ghostly sense of dizzying motion.

"Are you absolutely sure you know what you're doing"

"Goodness, no." Merlin was reclining back in his seat, booted feet up on the console, hands knitted behind his neck. Ancient orchestral music was piping into the room, building up to a magnificent and doubtless delicately timed climax. "Which isn't to say that this isn't an incredibly tricky maneuver, of course, requiring enormous skill and courage."

"What worries me is that you might be right."

Sora remembered the times Captain Tchagra had sent probes into the Waynet, only to watch as each was shredded, sliced apart by momentum gradients that could flense matter down to its fundamentals. The Waynet twinkled because tiny grains of cosmic dust were constantly drifting into it, each being annihilated in a pretty little flash of exotic radiation. Right now, she thought, they were cruising toward that boundary, dead set on what ought to have been guaranteed destruction.

She tried to inject calm into her voice. "So how did you come by the syrinx, Merlin?"

"Isn't much to look at, you know. A black cone, about as long as you're tall. Even in my era we couldn't make them, or even safely dismantle the few we still had. Very valuable things."

"The Cohort weren't overly thrilled that you stole one, according to the legend."

"As if they cared. They had so few left, they were too scared to actually *use* them."

Sora buckled herself into a seat.

She knew roughly what was about to happen, although no one had understood the details for tens of thousands of years. Just before hitting the Way, the syrinx would chirp a series of quantum-gravitational fluctuations at the boundary layer, the skin, no thicker than a Planck-length, which separated normal spacetime from the rushing spacetime contained within the Way. For an instant, the momentum gradients would relax, allowing the ship to enter the accelerated medium without being sliced.

That was the theory, anyway.

The music reached its crescendo now, ship's thrust notching higher, pushing Sora and Merlin back into their seats. The shriek of the propulsion system merged with the shriek of violins, too harmoniously to be accidental. Merlin's look of quiet amusement did not falter. A cascade of liquid notes played over the music; the song of the syrinx translated into the audio spectrum.

There was a peak of thrust, then the impulse ended abruptly, along with the music.

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Sora looked to the exterior view.

For a moment, it seemed as if the stars, and the nearer planets and sun of this system, hadn't actually changed at all. But after a few seconds, she saw that they burned appreciably brighter—and, it seemed, bluer—in one hemisphere of the sky, redder and dimmer in the other. And they were growing bluer and redder by the moment, and now bunching, swimming like shoals of luminous fish, obeying relativistic currents. A planet slammed past from out of nowhere, distorted as if squeezed in a fist. The system seemed frozen behind them, shot through with red like an iron orrery snatched from the forge.

"Transition to Waynet achieved," said the ship.

Later, Merlin took her down to the forward observation blister, a pressurized sphere of metasapphire that could be pushed beyond the hull like a protruding eye. The walls were opaque when they arrived, and when Merlin sealed the entry hatch, it turned the same shade of grey, merging seamlessly.

"Not to alarm you or anything," the familiar said. "But I can't communicate with the copy of myself from in here. That means I can't help you if . . ."

Sora kissed Merlin, silencing the voice in her head. "I'm sorry," she said, almost instantly. "It seemed . . ."

"Like the right thing to do?" Merlin's smile was difficult to judge, but he did not seem displeased.

"No, not really. Probably the wrong thing, actually."

"I'd be lying if I said I didn't find you attractive, Sora. And like I said—it has been rather a long time since I had human company." He drew himself to her, their free-floating bodies hooking together in the center of the blister, slowly turning until all sense of orientation was gone. "Of course, my reasons for rescuing you were entirely selfless. . . ."

". . . of course. . . ."

"But I won't deny that there was a small glimmer of hope at the back of my mind; the tiniest spark of fantasy. . . ."

They shed their clothes, untidy bundles which orbited around their coupled bodies. They began to make love, slowly at first, and then with increasing energy, as if it was only now that Sora was fully waking from the long centuries of frostwatch.

She thought of Verdin, and then hated herself for the crass biochemical predictability of her mind, the unfailing way it dredged up the wrong memories at the worst of times. What had happened back then, what had happened between them, was three thousand years in the past, unrecorded by anything or anyone except herself. She had not even mourned him yet, not even allowed the familiar to give her that particular indulgence. She studied Merlin, looking for hints of his true age . . . and failed, utterly, to detach the part of her mind capable of the job.

"Do you want to see something glorious?" Merlin asked, later, after they had hung together wordlessly for many minutes.

"If you think you can impress me . . ."

He whispered to the ship, causing the walls to lose their opacity.

Sora looked around. By some trick of holographics, the ship itself was not visible at all from within the blister. It was just her and Merlin, floating free.

And what she saw beyond them was indeed glorious—even if some detached part of her mind knew that the view could not be completely natur-

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al, and that in some way the hues and intensities of light had been shifted to aid comprehension. The walls of the Waynet slammed past at eye-wrenching speed, illuminated by the intense, doppler-shifted annihilation of dust particles, so that it seemed as if they were flying in the utmost darkness, down a tube of twinkling violet that reached toward infinity. The spacetime in which the ship drifted like a seed moved so quickly that the difference between its speed and light amounted to only one part in a hundred billion. Once a second in subjective time, the ship threaded itself through shining hoops as wide as the Waynet itself; constraining rings spaced eight light-hours apart, part of the inscrutable exotic-matter machinery that had serviced this Galaxy-spanning transit system. Ahead, all the stars in the universe crowded into an opalescent jeweled mass, hanging ahead like a congregation of bright angels. It was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen.

"It's the only way to travel," Merlin said.

The journey would take four days of shiptime: nineteen centuries of worldtime.

The subjective time spent in Waynet flight amounted only to twenty-three hours. But the ship had to make many transitions between Ways, and they were never closer than tens of light-minutes apart, presumably because of the nightmarish consequences that would ensue if two opposing streams of accelerated spacetime ever touched.

"Aren't you worried we'll wander into Huskers, Merlin?"

"Worth it for the big reward, wouldn't you say?"

"Tell me more about this mystical gun, and I might believe you."

Merlin settled back in his seat, drawing a deep breath. "Almost everything I know could be wrong."

"I'll take that risk."

"Whatever it was, it was fully capable of destroying whole worlds. Even stars, if the more outlandish stories are to be believed." He looked down at his hand, as if suddenly noticing his impeccably manicured fingernails.

"Ask him how he thinks it works," the familiar said. "Then at least we'll have an idea how thorough he's been."

She put the question to Merlin, as casually as she could.

"Gravity," he said. "Isn't that obvious? It may be a weak force, but there isn't anything in the universe that doesn't feel it."

"Like a bigger version of the syrinx?"

Merlin shrugged. Sora realized that it was not his fingernails to which he was paying attention, but the ornate ring she had noticed before, inset with a ruby stone in which two sparks seemed to orbit like fireflies. "It's almost certainly the product of Waymaker science. A posthuman culture that was able to engineer—to mechanize—spacetime. But I don't think it worked like the syrinx. I think it made singularities; that it plucked globules of mass-energy from vacuum and squashed them until they were within their own event horizons."

"Black holes," the familiar said, and Sora echoed her words aloud.

Merlin looked pleased. "Very small ones; atomic-scale. It doped them with charge, then accelerated them up to something only marginally less than the speed of light. They didn't have time to decay. For that, of course, it needed more energy, and more still just to prevent itself being ripped apart by the stresses."

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"A gun that fires black holes? We'd win, wouldn't we? With something like that? Even if there was only one of them?"

Merlin fingered the ruby-centered ring.

"That's the general idea."

Sora took Merlin's hand, stroking the fingers, until her own alighted on the ring. It was more intricate than she had realized before. The twin sparks were whirling around each other, glints of light locked in a waltz, as if driven by some microscopic clockwork buried in the ruby itself.

"What does it mean?" she asked, sensing that this was both the wrong and the right question.

"It means . . ." Merlin smiled, but it was a moment before he completed the sentence. "It means, I suppose, that I should remember death."

They fell out of the Way for the last time, entering a system that did not seem markedly different than a dozen others they had skipped through. The star was a yellow main-sequence sun, accompanied by the usual assortment of rocky worlds and gas giants. The second and third planets out from the sun were steaming hot cauldrons, enveloped by acidic atmosphere at crushing temperature, the victims of runaway heat-trapping processes, the third more recently than the second. The fourth planet was smaller, and seemed to have been the subject of a terraforming operation that had taken place some time after the Flourishing: its atmosphere, though thin, was too dense to be natural. Thirteen separate Ways punched through the system's ecliptic at different angles, safely distant from planetary and asteroidal orbits.

"It's a Nexus," Merlin said. "A primary Waynet interchange. You find systems like this every thousand or so light-years through the plane of the Galaxy, and a good way out of it as well. Back when everyone used the Waynet, this system would have been a meeting point, a place where traders swapped goods and tales from half-way to the Core."

"Bit of a dump *now,* though, isn't it."

"Perfect for hiding something very big and very nasty, provided you remember where it was you hid it."

"You mentioned something about a storm. . . ."

"You'll see."

The Way had dropped them in the inner part of the system, but Merlin said that what he wanted was further out, beyond the system's major asteroid belt. It would take a few days to reach.

"And what are we going to do when we get there?" Sora asked. "Just pick this thing up and take it with us?"

"Not exactly," Merlin said. "I suspect it will be harder than that. Not so hard that we haven't got a chance, but hard enough. . . ." He seemed to falter, perhaps for the first time since she had known him; that aura of supreme confidence cracking minutely.

"What part do you want me to play?"

"You're a soldier," he said. "Figure that out for yourself."

"I don't know quite what it is I've found," the familiar said, when she was again alone. "I've been waiting to show you, but he's had you in those war simulations for hours. Either that or you two have been occupying yourselves in other ways. Any idea what he's planning?"

Merlin had a simulator, a smaller version of the combat-training modules Sora knew from warcreche.

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"A lot of the simulations had a common theme: an attack against a white pyramid."

"Implying some foreknowledge, wouldn't you say? As if Merlin knows something of what he will find?"

"I've had that feeling ever since we met him." She was thinking of the smell of him, the shockingly natural way their bodies meshed, despite their being displaced by thousands of years. She tried to flush those thoughts from her mind. What they were now discussing was a kind of betrayal, on a more profound level than anything committed so far, because it lacked any innocence. "What is it, then?"

"I've been scanning the later log files, and I've found something that seems significant, something that seemed to mark a turning point in his hunt for the weapon. I have no idea what it was. But it took me until now to realize just how strange it was."

"Another system?"

"A very large structure, nowhere near any star, but nonetheless accessible by Waynet."

"A Waymaker artifact, then."

"Almost certainly."

The structure was visible on the screen. It looked like a child's toy star, or a metallic starfish, textured in something that resembled beaten gold or the luster of insect wings, filigreed in a lacework of exotic-matter scaffolds. It filled most of the view, shimmering with its own soft illumination.

"This is what Merlin would have seen with his naked eyes, just after his ship left the Way."

"Very pretty." She had meant the remark to sound glib, but it came out as a statement of fact.

"And large. The object's more than ten light-minutes away, which makes it more than four light-minutes in cross-section. Comfortably larger than any star on the main sequence. And yet somehow it holds itself in shape—in quite preposterous shape—against what must be unimaginable self-gravity. Merlin, incidentally, gave it the name Brittlestar, which seems as good as any."

"Poetic bastard." *Poetic sexy bastard,* she thought.

"There's more, if you're interested. I have access to the sensor records from the ship, and I can tell you that the Brittlestar is a source of intense gravitational radiation. It's like a beacon, sitting there, pumping out gravity waves from somewhere near its heart. There's something inside it that is making spacetime ripple periodically."

"You think Merlin went inside it, don't you?"

"*Something* happened, that's for sure. This is the last log Merlin filed, on his approach to the object, before a month-long gap."

It was another mumbled soliloquy—except this time, his sobs were of something other than despair. Instead, they sounded like the sobs of the deepest joy imaginable. As if, finally, he had found what he was looking for, or at least knew that he was closer than ever, and that the final prize was not far from reach. But that was not what made Sora shiver. It was the face she saw. It was Merlin, beyond any doubt. But his face was lined with age, and his eyes were those of someone older than anyone Sora had ever known.

The fifth and sixth planets were the largest.

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The fifth was the heavier of the two, zones of differing chemistry banding it from tropic to pole, girdled by a ring system that was itself braided by the resonant forces of three large moons. Merlin believed that the ring system had been formed since the Flourishing. A cloud of radiation-drenched human relics orbited the world, dating from unthinkably remote eras; perhaps earlier than the Waymaker time. Merlin swept the cloud with sensors tuned to sniff out weapons systems, or the melange of neutrino flavors that betokened Husker presence. The sweeps all returned negative.

"You know where the gun is?" Sora asked.

"I know how to reach it, which is all that matters."

"Maybe it's time to start being a little less cryptic. Especially if you want me to help you."

He looked wounded, as if she had ruined a game hours in the making. "I just thought you'd appreciate the thrill of the chase."

"This isn't about the thrill of the chase, Merlin. It's about the nastiest weapon imaginable and the fact that we have to get our hands on it before the enemy, so that we can incinerate *them* first. So we can commit xenocide." She said it again: "Xenocide. Sorry. Doesn't that conform to your romantic ideals of the righteous quest?"

"It won't be xenocide," he said, touching the ring again, nervously. "Listen: I want that gun as much as you do. That's why I chased it for ten thousand years." Was it her imagination, or had the ring not been on his hand in any of the recordings she had seen of him? She remembered the old man's hands she had seen in the last recording, the one taken just before his time in the Brittlestar, and she was sure they carried no ring. Now Merlin's voice was matter of fact. "The structure we want is on the outermost moon."

"Let me guess. A white pyramid?"

He offered a smile. "Couldn't be closer if you tried."

They fell into orbit around the gas giant. All the moons showed signs of having been extensively industrialized since the Flourishing, but the features that remained on their surfaces were gouged by millennia of exposure to sleeting cosmic radiation and micrometeorites. Nothing looked significantly younger than the surrounding landscapes of rock and ice. Except for the kilometer-high white pyramid on the third moon, which was in a sixteen-day orbit around the planet. It looked as if it had been chiseled out of alabaster sometime the previous afternoon.

"Not exactly subtle," Merlin said. "Self-repair mechanisms must still be functional, to one degree or another, and that implies that the control systems for the gun will still work. It also means that the counter-intrusion systems will also be operable."

"Oh, good."

"Aren't you excited that we're about to end the longest war in human history?"

"But we're not, are we? I mean, be realistic. It'll take tens of thousands of years simply for the knowledge of this weapon's existence to reach the remotest areas of the war. Nothing will happen overnight."

"I can see why it would disturb you," Merlin said, tapping a finger against his teeth. "None of us have ever known anything other than war with the Huskers."

"Just show me where it is."

They made one low orbital pass over the pyramid, alert for buried weapons, but no attack came. On the next pass, lower still, Merlin's ship

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dropped proctors to snoop ground defenses. "Maybe they had something bigger once," Merlin said. "Artillery that could take us out from millions of kilometers. But if it ever existed, it's not working anymore."

They made groundfall a kilometer from the pyramid, then waited for all but three of the proctors to return to the ship. Merlin tasked the trio to secure a route into the structure, but their use was limited. Once the simple-minded machines were out of command range of the ship—which happened as soon as they had penetrated beyond the outer layer of the structure—they were essentially useless.

"Who built the pyramid? And how did you know about it?"

"The same culture who got into the war I told you about," he said, as they clamped on the armored carapaces of their suits in the airlock. "They were far less advanced than the Waymakers, but they were a lot closer to them historically, and they knew enough to control the weapon and use it for their own purposes."

"How'd they find it?"

"They stole it. By then the Waymaker culture was—how shall I put it—sleeping? Not really paying due attention to the use made of its artifacts?"

"You're being cryptic again, Merlin."

"Sorry. Solitude does that to you."

"Did you meet someone out there, Merlin—someone who knew about the gun, and told you where to find it?" And made you young in the process? she thought.

"My business, isn't it?"

"Maybe once. Now, I'd say we're in this together. Equal partners. Fair enough?"

"Nothing's fair in war, Sora." But he was smiling, defusing the remark, even as he slipped his helmet down over the neck ring, twisting it to engage the locking mechanism.

"How big is the gun?" Sora asked.

The pyramid rose ahead, blank as an origami sculpture, entrance ducts around the base concealed by intervening landforms. Merlin's proctors had already found a route that would at least take them some way inside.

"You won't be disappointed," Merlin said.

"And what are we going to do when we find it? Just drag it behind us?"

"Trust me." Merlin's laugh crackled over the radio. "Moving it won't be a problem."

They walked slowly along a track cleared by proctors, covered at the same time by the hull-mounted weapons on *Tyrant*.

"There's something ahead," Merlin said, a few minutes later. He raised his own weapon and pointed toward a pool of darkness fifteen or twenty meters in front of them. "It's artifactual; definitely metallic."

"I thought your proctors cleared the area."

"Looks like they missed something."

Merlin advanced ahead of her. As they approached the dark object, it resolved into an elongated form half buried in the ice, a little to the left of the track. It was a body.

"Been here a while," Merlin said, a minute or so later, when he was close enough to see the object properly. "Armor's pitted by micrometeorite impacts."

"It's a Husker, isn't it."

Merlin's helmet nodded. "My guess is they were in this system a few cen-

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turies ago. Must have been attracted by the pyramid, even if they didn't necessarily know its significance."

"I've never seen one this close. Be careful, won't you?

Merlin knelt down to examine the creature.

The shape was much more androform than Sora had been expecting, the same general size and proportions as a suited human. The suit was festooned with armored protrusions, ridges, and horns, its blackened outer surface leathery and devoid of anything genuinely mechanical. One arm was outspread, terminating in a human-looking hand, complexly gauntleted. A long knobby weapon lay just out of reach, lines blurred by the same processes of erosion that had afflicted the Husker.

Merlin clamped his hands around the head.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" He was twisting now; she could hear the grunts of exertion, before his suit's servosystems came online and took the brunt of the effort. "I've always wanted to find one this well-preserved," Merlin said. "Never thought I'd get a chance to tell if an old rumor was even half-way right."

The helmet detached from the creature's torso, cracking open along a fine seam which ran from the crown to the beaklike protrusion at the helmet's front. Vapor pulsed from the gap. Merlin placed the separated halves of the helmet on the ground, then tapped on his helmet torch, bringing light down on the exposed head. Sora stepped closer. The Husker's head was encased in curling matte-black support machinery, like a statue enveloped in vine.

But it was well preserved, and very human.

"I don't like it," she said. "What does it mean?"

"It means," Merlin said, "that occasionally one should pay proper attention to rumors."

"Talk to me, Merlin. Start telling me what I need to hear, or we don't take another step toward that pyramid."

"You will like very little of it."

She looked, out of the corner of her eye, at the marblelike face of the Husker. "I already don't like it, Merlin; what have I got to lose?"

Merlin started to say something, then fell to the ground, executing the fall with the slowness that came with the moon's feeble gravity.

"Oh, nice timing," the familiar said.

Reflexes drove Sora down with him, until the two of them were crouching low on the rusty surface. Merlin was still alive. She could hear him breathing, but each breath came like the rasp of a saw.

"I'm hit, Sora. I don't know how badly."

"Hold on." She accessed the telemetry from his suit, graphing up a medical diagnostic on the inner glass of her helmet.

"There," said the familiar. "A beam-weapon penetration in the thoracic area; small enough that the self-sealants prevented any pressure loss, but not rapidly enough to stop the beam gnawing into his chest."

"Is that bad?"

"Well, it's not good . . . but there's a chance the beam would have cauterized as it traveled, preventing any deep internal bleeding. . . ."

Merlin coughed. He managed to ask her what it was.

"You've taken a laser hit, I think." She was speaking quickly. "Maybe part of the pyramid defenses."

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"I really should have those proctors of mine checked out." Merlin managed a laugh which then transitioned into a series of racking coughs. "Bit late for that now, don't you think?"

"If I can get you back to the ship . . ."

"No. We have to go on." He coughed again, and then was a long time catching his breath. "The longer we wait, the harder it will be."

"After ten thousand years, you're worried about a few minutes?"

"Yes, now that the pyramid defenses are alerted."

"You're in no shape to move."

"I'm winded, that's all. I think I can. . . ." His voice dissolved into coughs, but even while it was happening, Sora watched him push himself upright. When he spoke again, his voice was hardly a wheeze. "I'm gambling there was only one of whatever it was. Otherwise we should never have made it as far as we did."

"I hope you're right, Merlin."

"There's—um—something else. Ship's just given me a piece of not entirely welcome news. A few neutrino sources that weren't there when we first got here."

"Oh, great." Sora didn't need to be told what that meant: a Husker swarm, one that had presumably been waiting around the gas giant all along, chilled down below detection thresholds. "Bastards must have been sleeping, waiting for something to happen here."

"Sounds like a perfectly sensible strategy," the familiar said, before projecting a map onto Sora's faceplate, confirming the arrival of the enemy ships. "One of the moons has a liquid ocean. My guess is that the Huskers were parked below the ice."

Sora asked Merlin: "How long before they get here?"

"No more than two or three hours."

"Right. Then we'd better make damn sure we've got that gun by then, right?"

She carried him most of the way, his heels scuffing the ground in a half-hearted attempt at locomotion. But he remained lucid, and Sora began to hope that the wound really had been cauterized by the beam-weapon.

"You knew the Husker would be human, didn't you?" she said, to keep him talking.

"Told you: rumors. The alien cyborg story was just that—a fiction our own side invented. I told you it wouldn't be xenocide."

"Not good enough, Merlin." She was about to tell him about the symbiote in her head, then drew back, fearful that it would destroy what trust he had in her. "I know you've been lying. I hacked your ship's log."

They had reached the shadow of the pyramid, descending the last hillock toward the access ports spaced around the rim.

"Thought you trusted me."

"I had to know if there was a reason *not* to. And I think I was right."

She told him what she had learnt; that he'd been traveling for longer than he had told her—whole decades longer, by shiptime—and that he had grown old in that journey, and perhaps a little insane. And then how he had seemed to find the Brittlestar. "Problem is, Merlin, we—*I*—don't know what happened to you in that thing, except that it had something to do with finding the gun, and you came out of it younger than when you went in!"

"You really want to know?"

"Take a guess."

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He started telling her some of it, while she dragged him toward their destination.

The pyramid was surrounded by tens of meters of self-repairing armor, white as bone. If the designers had not allowed deliberate entrances around its rim, Sora doubted that she and Merlin would ever have found a way to get inside.

"Should have been sentries here, once," said the man leaning against her shoulder. "It's lucky for us that everything falls apart, eventually."

"Except your fabled gun." They were moving down a sloping corridor, the walls and ceiling unblemished, the floor strewn with icy debris from the moon's surface. "Anyway, stop changing the subject."

Merlin coughed and resumed his narrative. "I was getting very old and very disillusioned. I hadn't found the gun and I was about ready to give up. That or go insane. Then I found the Brittlestar. Came out of the Waynet and there it was, sitting there pulsing gravity waves at me."

"It would take a pair of neutron stars," the familiar said. "Orbiting around each other, to generate that kind of signature."

"What happened next?" Sora asked.

"Don't really remember. Not properly. I went—or was taken—inside it—and there I met . . ." He paused, and for a moment she thought it was because he needed to catch his breath. But that wasn't the reason. "I met *entities*, I suppose you'd call them. I quickly realized that they were just highly advanced projections of a maintenance program left behind by the Waymakers."

"They made you young, didn't they."

"I don't think it was stretching their capabilities overmuch, put it like that."

The corridor flattened out, branching in several different directions. Merlin leant toward one of the routes.

"Why?"

"So I could finish the job. Find the gun."

The corridor opened out into a chamber, a bowl-ceilinged control room, unpressurized and lit only by the wavering light of their helmets. Seats and consoles were arrayed around a single spherical projection device, cradled in ash-colored gimbals. Corpses slumped over some of the consoles, but nothing remained except skeletons draped in colorless rags. Presumably they had rotted away for centuries before the chamber was finally opened to vacuum, and even that would have been more than twenty thousand years ago.

"They must have been attacked by a bioweapon," Merlin said, easing himself into one of the seats, which—after exhaling a cloud of dust—seemed able to take his weight. "Something that left the machines intact."

Sora walked around, examining the consoles, all of which betrayed a technology higher than anything the Cohort had known for millennia. Some of the symbols on them were recognizable antecedents of those used in Main, but there was nothing she could actually read.

Merlin made a noise that might have been a grunt of suppressed pain, and when Sora looked at him, she saw that he was spooling the optical cable from his suit sleeve, just as he had when they had first met on the cometary shard. He lifted an access panel back on the top of the console, exposing an intestinal mass of silvery circuits. He seemed to know exactly

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where to place the end of the spool, allowing its microscopic cilia to tap into the ancient system.

The projection chamber was warming to life now: amber light swelling from its heart, solidifying into abstract shapes, neutral test representations. For a moment, the chamber showed a schematic of the ringed giant and its moons, with the locations of the approaching Husker ships marked with complex ideograms. The familiar was right: their place of sanctuary must have been the moon with the liquid ocean. Then the shapes flowed liquidly, zooming in on the gas giant.

"You wanted to know where the gun was," Merlin said. "Well, I'm about to show you."

The view enlarged on a cyclonic storm near the planet's equator, a great swirling red eye in the atmosphere.

"It's a metastable storm," Sora said. "Common feature of gas giants. You're not telling me—"

Merlin's gauntleted fingers were at work now, flying across an array of keys marked with symbols of unguessable meaning. "The storm's natural, of course, or at least it was, before these people hid the gun inside it, exploiting the pressure differentials to hold the gun at a fixed point in the atmosphere, for safekeeping. There's just one small problem."

"Go ahead. . . ."

"The gun isn't a gun. It functions as weapon, but that's mostly accidental. It certainly wasn't the intention of the Waymakers."

"You're losing me, Merlin."

"Maybe I should tell you about the ring."

Something was happening to the surface of the gas giant now. The cyclone was not behaving in the manner of other metastable storms Sora had seen. It was spinning perceptibly, throwing off eddies from its curlicued edge like the tails of seahorses. It was growing a bloodier red by the second.

"Yes," Sora said. "Tell me about the ring."

"The Waymakers gave it to me, when they made me young. It's a reminder of what I have to do. You see, if I fail, it will be very bad for every thinking creature in this part of the galaxy. What did you see when you looked at the ring, Sora?"

"A red gem, with two lights orbiting inside it."

"Would you be surprised if I told you that the lights represent two neutron stars; two of the densest objects in the universe? And that they're in orbit about each other, spinning around their mutual center of gravity?"

"Inside the Brittlestar."

She caught his glance, directed quizzically toward her. "Yes," Merlin said slowly. "A pair of neutron stars, born in supernovae, bound together by gravity, slowly spiraling closer and closer to each other."

The cyclonic storm was whirling insanely now, sparks of subatmospheric lightning flickering around its boundary. Sora had the feeling that titanic—and quite inhuman—energies were being unleashed, as if something very close to magic was being deployed beneath the clouds. It was the most terrifying thing she had ever seen.

"I hope you know how to fire this when the time comes, Merlin."

"All the knowledge I need is carried by the ring. It taps into my bloodstream and builds structures in my head that tell me exactly what I need to know, on a level so deep that I hardly know it myself."

"Husker swarm will be within range in ninety minutes," the familiar

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said, "assuming attack profiles for the usual swarm boser and charm-torp weapon configurations. Of course, if they have any refinements, they might be in attack range a little sooner than that. . . ."

"Merlin: tell me about the neutron stars, will you? I need something to keep my mind occupied."

"The troublesome part is what happens when they *stop* spiraling around each other and *collide*. Mercifully, it's a fairly rare event even by Galactic standards—it doesn't happen more than once in a million years, and when it does it's usually far enough away not to be a problem."

"But if it isn't far away—how troublesome would it be?"

"Imagine the release of more energy in a second than a typical star emits in ten billion years: one vast photo-leptonic fireball. An unimaginably bright pulse of gamma-rays. Instant sterilization for thousands of light-years in any direction."

The cyclone had grown a central bulge now, a perfectly circular bruise rising above the surface of the planet. As it rose, towering thousands of kilometers above the cloud layer, it elongated like a waterspout. Soon, Sora could see it backdropped against space. And there was something rising within it.

"The Waymakers tried to stop it, didn't they."

Merlin nodded. "They found the neutron star binary when they extended the Waynet deeper into the galaxy. They realized that the two stars were only a few thousand years from colliding together—and that there was almost nothing they could do about it."

She could see what she thought was the weapon, now, encased in the waterspout like a seed. It was huge—larger perhaps than this moon. It looked fragile, nonetheless, like an impossibly ornate candelabra, or a species of deep sea medusa, glowing with its own bioluminescence. Sloughing atmosphere, the thing came to a watchful halt, and the waterspout slowly retracted back toward the cyclone, which was now slowing, like a monstrous flywheel grinding down.

"Nothing?"

"Well—almost nothing."

"They built the Brittlestar around it," Sora said. "A kind of shield, right? So that, when the stars collided, the flash would be contained?"

"Not even Waymaker science could contain that much energy." Merlin looked to the projection, seeming to pay attention to the weapon for the first time. If he felt any elation on seeing his gun for the first time, none of it was visible on his face. He looked, instead, ashen—as if the years had suddenly reclaimed what the Waymakers had given him. "All they could do was keep the stars in check, keep them from spiraling any closer. So they built the Brittlestar, a vast machine with only one function: to constantly nudge the orbits of the neutron stars at its heart. For every angstrom that the stars fell toward each other, the Brittlestar pushed them an angstrom apart. And it was designed to keep doing that for a million years, until the Waymakers found a way to shift the entire binary beyond the Galaxy. You want to know how they kept pushing them apart?"

Sora nodded, though she thought she half-knew the answer already.

"Tiny black holes," Merlin said. "Accelerated close to the speed of light, each black hole interacting gravitationally with the binary before evaporating in a puff of pair-production radiation."

"Just the same way the gun functions. That's no coincidence, is it?"

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"The gun—what we call the gun—was just a component in the Brittlestar; the source of relativistic black holes needed to keep the neutron stars from colliding."

Sora looked around the room. "And these people stole it?"

"Like I said, they were closer to the Waymakers than us. They knew enough about them to dismantle part of the Brittlestar, to override its defenses and remove the mechanism they needed to win their war."

"But the Brittlestar . . ."

"Hasn't been working properly ever since. Its capability to regenerate itself was harmed when the subsystem was stolen, and the remaining black-hole generating mechanisms can't do all the work required. The neutron stars have continued to spiral closer together—slowly but surely."

"But you said they were only a few thousand years from collision. . . ."

Merlin had not stopped working the controls in all this time. The gun had come closer, seemingly oblivious to the ordinary laws of celestial mechanics. Down below, the planetary surface had returned to normality, except for a ruddier hue to the storm.

"Maybe now," Merlin said, "you're beginning to understand why I want the gun so badly."

"You want to return it, don't you. You never really wanted to find a weapon."

"I did, once." Merlin seemed to tap some final reserve of energy, his voice growing momentarily stronger. "But now I'm older and wiser. In less than four thousand years the stars meet, and it suddenly won't matter who wins this war. We're like ignorant armies fighting over a patch of land beneath a rumbling volcano!"

Four thousand years, Sora thought. More time had passed since she had been born.

"If we don't have the gun," she said, "we die anyway—wiped out by the Huskers. Not much of a choice, is it?"

"At least *something* would survive. Something that might even still think of itself as human."

"You're saying that we should capitulate? That we get our hands on the ultimate weapon, and then not *use* it?"

"I never said it was going to be easy, Sora." Merlin pitched forward, slowly enough that she was able to reach him before he slumped into the exposed circuitry of the console. His coughs were loud in her helmet. "Actually, I think I'm more than winded," he said, when he was able to speak at all.

"We'll get you back to the ship; the proctors can help. . . ."

"It's too late, Sora."

"What about the gun?"

"I'm . . . doing something rather rash, in the circumstances. Trusting it to you. Does that sound utterly insane?"

"I'll betray you. I'll give the gun to the Cohort. You know that, don't you?"

Merlin's voice was soft. "I don't think you will. I think you'll do the right thing and return it to the Brittlestar."

"Don't make me betray you!"

He shook his head. "I've just issued a command that reassigns control of my ship to you. The proctors are now under your command—they'll show you everything you need."

"Merlin, I'm begging you. . . ."

His voice was weak now, hard to distinguish from the scratchy irregular-

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ity of his breathing. She leant down to him and touched helmets, hoping the old trick would make him easier to hear. "No good, Sora. Much too late. I've signed it all over."

"No!" She shook him, almost in anger. Then she began to cry, loud enough so that she was in no doubt he would hear it. "I don't even know what you want me to do with it!"

"Take the ring, then the rest will be abundantly clear."

"What?" She could hardly understand herself now.

"Put the ring on. Do it now, Sora. Before I die. So that I at least know it's done."

"When I take your glove off, I'll kill you, Merlin. You know that, don't you? And I won't be able to put the ring on until I'm back in the ship."

"I . . . just want to see you take it. That's enough, Sora. And you'd better be quick. . . ."

"I love you, you bastard!"

"Then do this."

She placed her hands around the cuff seal of his gauntlet, feeling the alloy locking mechanism, knowing that it would only take a careful depression of the sealing latches, and then a quick twisting movement, and the glove would slide free, releasing the air in his suit. She wondered how long he would last before consciousness left him—no more than tens of seconds, she thought, unless he drew breath first. And by the state of his breathing, that would not be easy for him.

She removed the gauntlet, and took his ring.

Tyrant lifted from the moon.

"Husker forces grouping in attack configuration," the familiar said, tapping directly into the ship's avionics. "Hull sensors read sweeps by targeting lidar . . . an attack is imminent, Sora."

Tyrant's light armor would not save them, Sora knew. The attack would be blinding and brief, and she would probably never know it had happened. But that didn't mean that she was going to *let* it happen.

She felt the gun move to her will.

It would not always be like this, she knew: the gun was only hers until she returned it to the Waymakers. But for now it felt like an inseparable part of her, like a twin she had never known, but whose every move was familiar to her fractionally in advance of it being made. She felt the gun energize itself, reaching deep into the bedrock of spacetime, plundering mass-energy from quantum foam, forging singularities in its heart.

She felt readiness.

"First element of swarm has deployed charm-torps," the familiar reported, an odd slurred quality entering her voice. "Activating *Tyrant*'s countermeasures. . . ."

The hull rang like a bell.

"Countermeasures engaging charm-torps . . . neutralized . . . second wave deployed by the swarm . . . closing . . ."

"How long can we last?"

"Countermeasures exhausted . . . we can't parry a third wave; not at this range."

Sora closed her eyes and made the weapon spit death.

She had targeted two of the three elements of the Husker swarm; leaving the third—the furthest ship from her—unharmed.

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She watched the relativistic black holes fold space around the two targeted ships, crushing each instantly, as if in a vice.

"Third ship dropping to max . . . maximum attack range; retracting charm-torp launchers. . . ."

"This is Sora for the Cohort," she said in Main, addressing the survivor on the general ship-to-ship channel. "Or what remains of the Cohort. Perhaps you can understand what I have to say. I could kill you, now, instantly, if I chose." She felt the weapon speak to her through her blood, reporting its status, its eagerness to do her bidding. "Instead, I'm about to give you a demonstration. Are you ready?"

"Sora . . ." said the familiar. "Something's wrong. . . ."

"What?"

"I'm not . . . well." The familiar's voice did not sound at all right now; drained of any semblance to Sora's own. "The ring must be constructing something in your brain; part of the interface between you and the gun . . . something stronger than me. . . . It's weeding me out, to make room for itself. . . ."

She remembered what Merlin had said about the structures the ring would make.

"You saved a part of yourself in the ship."

"Only a part," the familiar said. "Not all of me . . . not all of me at all. I'm sorry, Sora. I think I'm dying."

She dismantled the system.

Sora did it with artistry and flair, saving the best for last. She began with moons, pulverizing them, so that they began to flow into nascent rings around their parent worlds. Then she smashed the worlds themselves to pieces, turning them into cauls of hot ash and plasma. Finally—when it was the only thing left to destroy—she turned the gun on the system's star, impaling its heart with a salvo of relativistic black holes, throwing a killing spanner into the nuclear processes that turned mass into sunlight. In doing so, she interfered—catastrophically—with the delicate hydrostatic balance between pressure and gravity that held the star in shape. She watched it unpeel, shedding layers of outer atmosphere in a premature display of the death that awaited suns like it, four billion years in the future. And then she watched the last Husker ship, which had witnessed what she had wrought, turn and head out of the system.

She could have killed them all.

But she had let them live. Instead, she had shown the power that was—albeit temporarily—hers to command.

She wondered if there was enough humanity left in them to appreciate the clemency she had shown.

Later, she took *Tyrant* into the Waynet again, the vast luminous bulk of the gun following her like an obedient dragon. Sora's heart almost stopped at the fearful moment of entry, convinced that the syrinx would choose not to sing for its new master.

But it did sing, just as it had sung for Merlin.

And then, alone this time—more alone than she had been in her life—she climbed into the observation blister, and turned the metasapphire walls transparent, making the ship itself disappear, until there was only herself and the rushing, twinkling brilliance of the Way.

It was time to finish what Merlin had begun. O

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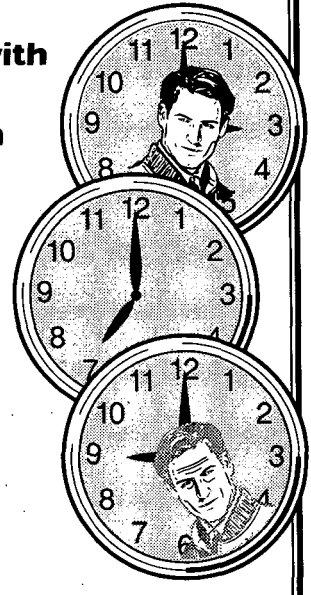
TIME TRAVEL VERB TENSES

You remind me
of yourself at an age
you haven't reached yet,
a time when you're comfortably old,
when you've cultivated fine wrinkles
and some softening pounds.

You remind me
of the person you're going to be someday—
whiter hair
and spottier skin
and a sense of how much you matter
to the functioning of the universe;
which is, of course,
for all of us,
not very much.

You remind me
of the person I fell in love with
last week—
am going to fall in love with
thirty-seven years from now.



You remind me
that it's dangerous
to go back
and meet someone you love
before you met them,
because you remind me
too much of yourself.

—Laurel Winter

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TWO SAMS

Robert Reed

Part of the inspiration for "Two Sams" comes from an addictive computer game that allows the player to build civilizations from scratch, and ignore the rest of his or her life as a consequence. Luckily, the author has found time to work on other projects including a new novel, *Marrow,* which will be out soon from Tor.

I emerge from that low hot savage jungle to discover a tiny village inhabited by a tiny people. Their only clothing is the native red dirt and the occasional skin of some brutalized animal. Without exception, they seem stunted by an impoverished diet. Their faces are wide and their blue-black eyes are huge and dull, and beneath their dirt is a yellowish skin hinting at sick livers and a wealth of parasites. But they farm, if only with fire and stone axes. And their huts, while simple, betray a working knowledge of knots and the art of weaving. When I look past their hunger and that enormous ignorance, I see a tiny light. The flickering that every great

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blaze must have at its inception. Plainly, they have never seen the likes of me before. I am wearing golden robes and jeweled sandals. I tower over their wide-eyed faces, showing them perfect teeth and a wise and patient smile. In their own half-born language, I tell them, I have come from heaven to make you a people. A nation. A civilization with no equal anywhere. I tell them, My name is Sam. Sam, the Strong. Then with a voice like thunder, I roar, Kneel to me! Now! Kneel!

The girl is prettier than anyone in class. Yet, miraculously, she seems interested in me. She sits next to me and flirts, earning warning stares from our calculus professor. She likes me enough to tease me about being spacey. Sleepy. Or am I drunk? None of those things, I promise. Then she proposes our first date. If that's what it is. Studying for our mid-term in the library. Her flirting is constant and infectious, and fun. I'm the one who suggests coffee at one of the all-night places near campus. And with a nervous little voice, I ask if she'd like to see a movie this Saturday. If you go with me, she jokes. Of course neither of us does well on the test, but after the movie and more coffee, she comes to my room and spends the night. Astonishing as that sounds. To me, nothing is more unlikely, or wondrous, then that perfect moment when I climb on top of her for the second time, her wide dark and pretty eyes staring up at me with an expression hungry and joyous, and wise in some deep way, and trusting, and against all odds, belonging to me.

I know nothing about the jungle plants. Not the edible ones, or the medicinal ones. Or which species are best avoided. I have never built any road, or a stone wall, or the simplest irrigation ditch. But what I offer is the knowledge—the timely irresistible insight—that such miracles are possible. That is what I give my earnest little people. I tell them that their crops can be improved by selective breeding. With words, I paint pictures of straight flat roads that allow farmers to move quickly and easily to their well-watered fields. If stone walls around our city sound like an extravagence, they become a treasure when the first band of raiders descend on us. And while I have never built a weapon more sophisticated than a pointed stick, I can nonetheless point my growing little nation toward a wonder weapon: It is their responsibility to find which stone makes the keenest blades, and which stick and feathers becomes the quickest shaft, and how to marry elastic wood and elastic gut, leaving you holding a longbow that can drive an arrow through any man's chest.

Her name is Sam, too. Short for Samantha. Which is a small problem for our friends, and a genuine blessing for us. We don't resemble one another physically, and we come from very different backgrounds. But we share the name. In that sense, we are already joined. We are quickly each other's best friend as well as determined lovers. When I take my Sam home for the first time, my mother knows. This is the one, she tells me. Overjoyed. Then I meet her parents—long-divorced and saddled with the usual stew of emotions. They are coldly pleasant and quick to warn us not to move too quickly. Life, they claim, is full of potential mistakes. Claymores, my future father-in-law calls them. He reminds me that I'm nothing but young. With a few beers in his belly, he tells me, Have fun. But remember this: No matter how much fun the fun is, it can vanish on you. One misstep. One claymore hiding in your path. And you lose a foot, or worse. Then you spend the rest of your life wishing that you were just one inch more cautious. One miserable inch!

Disaster strikes. My bowmen are in the northern mountains, exploring

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unmapped terrain, when they stumble across a city larger than any of ours. And in disturbing ways, more advanced. These people have their own eternal strongman sitting on a wide golden throne. He sends me a message in the form of my bowmen's severed heads strung like pearls on a rope crusted with blood and brains. The legionaires carrying those heads contemptuously demand my nation's gold. And because the extortion won't end here, I have them hacked apart. Then I ready my people for war. But while I have five tidy cities of literate farmers, my foe has a genuine army with iron swords and armed horsemen and a speed of assault that leaves three of my cities conquered and my capital under siege. Which is why, before it is too late, I step back in time. A cheat, perhaps. But in the face of extinction, there is no other choice. I step back to an earlier day when I told my wide-eyed followers about the magical power of written words. But instead of writing, I tell my brightest few that we must be ready for threats worse than the occasional raider. We need our own permanent army, and harder metals than bronze. Which causes them to ask doubtfully, Are such things possible, Lord? Absolutely, I tell them. Though I don't know where to find the best ores or how the new metal can be smelted and worked. This has to be their duty, and their honor, and when my geniuses master the difficulties and hammer the first swords from the cherry-red metal, I tell them another astonishing fact: That the wild horses roaming the western plains can be captured and tamed. Tamed, and ridden. Or they can be taught—incredible as it sounds—to pull wheeled carts full of professional soldiers along our growing system of roadways.

We marry after graduation, in the autumn, and enjoy a long delicious honeymoon in Mexico—a gift from my joyous parents. My Sammie and I make love standing in the damp shadow of a great pyramid. The moment feels etemal, and perfect. But minutes later, my young wife catches my eye wandering. No, I don't gaze lustily at the bikini-clad secretaries from Chicago, or even the stout native girls—the ragged leftovers of a vanquished empire. No, what catches my gaze and holds it, without release, is the stone face of a lost god. A strong, frank face. Cruel, and all-seeing. I stare for so long that my bride yanks at my arms, and cries. My soft civilized hands cling to the god's lower lip and his great bulging eyes. Finally, very slowly, I let go of him. I blink, and sigh, gradually returning to Sam's arms and her plaintive voice. And for the first time—securely embraced by the enduring institution that is marriage—she asks, Where do you go when you leave me, darling? Where, where, where?

Eventually my people reach the mountains, and just as I hoped, we are superior to our neighbors in many ways. No, we still don't have any written language. Our farms aren't as prosperous or orderly as I would like. But the other nation's king can see that our iron is equal to his, and our gaze is fearless, and he orders his scribes fill the soft white skin of lamb with our treaty of peace. And on that bloodless day, I win everything. As part of our agreement, his scribes now teach my youngest and brightest how to create a set of twisting lines that convey abstract and wondrous ideas. Ideas that men and their women will gladly give their lives for. Then after several more centuries, when my growing nation has surrounded his little one, the king attacks me. Too late. With too little. And it is his capital that is put under siege. And it is his language that vanishes into the past. And it is his once-brazen head that ends up perched on a cold black spear of iron erected beside my golden throne.

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She isn't planned, and she is. The baby. The daughter. That child constructed half of me, half of the other Sam. Our little one stems from a series of miscalculations. A distaste for the Pill. Too much wine at dinner. Then the condoms misplaced. Jokingly, I suggest that we name her Conspiracy. And the joke becomes so familiar that we decide on something similar. Constance. Connie, for short. So much joy for us, she is, and such an unrelenting burden. But it is a burden we are born to weather. Parents by their nature are little gods, and at least in those first days, we can think of her as being entirely our own creation. So dependent. So trusting, and simple. Entertaining us with her little mistakes and inspired blunders, and both of us relishing that game where you kneel down, pretending to be small like her, calmly and firmly explaining why it is wrong to yank the cat's tail or carry scissors that way or say aloud that Uncle George smells like old fish, even though it couldn't be more true. Even though we wish we could say it ourselves.

Great people build great works, I tell my nation. Advisers and scholars and generals and drab street urchins all lean close, listening to each of my great pronouncements. I describe pyramids and grand canals and cavernous libraries that will cull genius from all the far-flung nations. Still, the precise direction of my nation remains mine to choose. But what was once a simple trail in the jungle has turned into a maze. A conundrum. Whenever I stop talking, my smiling advisors speak to me, telling me that I should move the nation this way or that way. Always in their favorite directions. And because we are growing rapidly now—a four-way rush across new lands and little oceans—I find myself listening mostly to my generals. Brave, solid men who know the value of sharp iron, and later, who come to love those little cannons that a lone man can carry and fire, killing thousands of our enemies in his minuscule life. They want to fight everyone, and I let them fight. Why not? I ask myself. Nobody seems able to stand against us. But after a century of unrelenting battling, the other nations contrive a grand alliance. They have wealth and well-paid armies, plus the capacity to learn and adapt at an astonishing rate. For the first time, distant battles are lost. Conquered cities are retaken by my enemies. Then my own cities begin to surrender to the coming horde. After a decade of endless defeat and disaster, I do the unprecedented: I leave my palace, walking the streets of my capital city. What has gone so wrong? I ask my people. But nothing is wrong, they assure me. In loud and brazen voices, they talk about slaughters to come and how we will build towers and great walls from the corpses of our foes. But I know better, regardless. Everyone here has lost sons and fathers in the endless fighting. Literacy rates are down. Lifespans and body size are shrinking. If trends hold, everything that I have built will be put to a slow death. But the new muskets are coming, my people remind me. Weapons that can kill halfway to the horizon. And all I can do is shake my head, admitting to them, and myself, People should always be wiser than their weapons.

Connie ends up as our only child. Despite our best attempts to conceive again, there is no magic. No blessing. And then some routine test finds something profoundly wrong inside my Sam, and her ovaries are removed. In time, they say. The doctor, and everyone, says it. But we still have one daughter, of course. Five years old, then suddenly ten. How does this happen so quickly? Life, I mean. And then somehow we have allowed her to become thirteen and fourteen and fifteen, and she's so full of herself and her

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own vast importance. Rebellion becomes the normal state inside our little family. Connie's bedroom is an armed fortification, and she is an entire guerrilla army holed up with her television and telephone and stereo. I am still a god here, but a vanquished one. Lying awake at night, unaware that my Sam is in the same state of nervous alertness, I whisper: I wish I could go back and start over and do it better this time. Then Sam asks me, Where would you go? And I'm too startled to respond. Then she says, We never should have given her her own television. That's where we started losing her. And I ask both of us, But how can we go back? Perhaps I'm hoping there's some way to cheat, some loophole that I just don't know about. But there isn't. There won't be. And tnen my Sam, my sleepless and worried bride, takes hold of my penis with a fond little hand, and she whispers the truest words ever: But there's always worse then what we've got, she says. There's always the bigger Claymore that we walked right past, never suspecting that it was there. . . .

I select an earlier century to make my retum. And now I work to keep my people well educated, well fed, and as healthy as you can expect in a world that doesn't yet believe in germs or the magic of antibiotics. There are still wars to be fought, but only little ones that make a diplomatic point or conquer some nameless barbarians. Trade, not battle, is our lifeblood. We are an exploring nation that settles empty continents and keeps peace with our neighbors, and we constantly improve our splendid old cities. Water piped from the mountains allows millions to live beside my palace. Everywhere I turn my eyes, I see young women who would be beautiful in any realm. Tall and youthful, and unblemished, and dressed in every sort of gown. With a word, or even a quiet glance, I could bring them to my bed. In twos or threes, or more if I wished. But between me and them lies such a distance. It isn't that they are unreal or that I cannot love creatures such as them. But their reality is a small, ephemeral condition, and their beauty is even more fleeting. I blink my eyes, and their hair grays. I put my hands over my face to think, and they turn into dust and their granddaughters. It seems that I can love them only when they are a multitude. A beautiful, nubile mass. An army of young ladies standing outside my palace gates, hoping against hope to catch some little glimpse of their great and ageless and extremely lonely king.

My job has always been small and routine, and it has never given me any genuine pleasure. But it has brought money and a livelihood, a place to go during the long days and my own circle of friends. A certain woman works in my office. She is a few years younger than me, and recently divorced, and we tell ourselves that what happens is anything but planned. But really, we've been rather single-minded about getting into this affair. After twenty years of faithful monogamy, I find myself looking into the mirror in a motel room, watching the two of us. I feel rather sad, but my reflection looks happy. Joyous, even. Why is that? One copulation is plenty for me, but my lover insists on seconds. I resort to my hands, then my mouth. And as she moves, and groans, and arches her long back, I occupy my soul with things far away and far, far more important.

The four nations eventually make their alliance, and attack. With tanks and bombers, they manage to conquer my most distant cities. But then I raise my own armies and fleets of aircraft, and the cities are retaken, and I subdue portions of their empires as spoils of war. But when I offer gracious terms of surrender, my enemies dismiss me. Ignore me. Laugh at me, even.

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This is total warfare; utter victory and eternal defeat are the only possible outcomes. Somehow the alliance musters the forces and the will to turn the tide against me. My great nation is suddenly in retreat. Each year is worse than the year before. Finally, in despair, I take my generals and scientists into the most secure portion of my palace, and in a godly whisper, I describe a weapon of pure destruction. No, I don't know how to build the monster, but I give my people enough clues that they can cobble it together themselves. Then with four enormous missiles, I deliver a nuclear onslaught that leaves my enemies' capitals in ruin. But even then, they don't surrender. They steal the plans, build their own missiles, and we trade cities for another thirty years, leaving our climate sick and my people dying. My only hope is to retreat into the past and fight again, and again. This last horrible war consumes me. Wherever I am, a portion of me is always fighting it. Twenty times. Fifty times. A hundred and seventeen tries until I find victory. Which seems perfectly reasonable. What's the point in being a god if you cannot find the perfect course for those who are small enough and foolish enough to believe in you?

Sam flunks her tests; the cancer has retumed, in abundance. Surgeries and her chemo leave her weak and nauseous, and very nearly helpless. But what is so horrible for her, and for me, is a strange blessing, too. Connie returns to our lives after an absence of several years. In her early twenties, with an infant and no husband, she is horrified by the prospect of her mother's imminent death. Like a child, she cries. In a hundred ways, our daughter apologizes for past wrongs and absences and her bitter words and unspoken thoughts. When her mother's condition worsens, Connie lives with me at the hospital. Whispering, she tells both of us how much she loves us. And when Sam suddenly improves, Connie takes full credit, claiming that she prayed over her mother's bed and an angel came to her and said, This woman shall not be taken from you. Which is a load of pure bullshit, I'm thinking. It's nothing but a sign of my daughter's desperate need for forgiveness. She probably believes that she brought on her mother's cancer by making her life such a hell. But she's wrong, of course. The fault is entirely mine. If I just had been a more attentive, more loving husband, I keep thinking. Again, and again. And again.

There is a cure for cancer, I tell my scientists. My doctors. My priests. I don't know the means or even where to look. But if they search hard enough, with all the resources of my prosperous and victorious nation, they will find the means. I promise them. Yet fifty years of searching isn't enough time. Ten trillion pieces of gold is not enough money. In the end, I push every city and every little soul into this crucial chase, and the answer arrives after a century of unrelenting sacrifice. A grinning biologist hands me a vial filled with piss. At least that's how it looks to me. This is the cure, she promises. But I can't take the vial with me. I have to ask, What is this yellow goo? And she tells me. It is a combination of extracts drawn from rare beetles and a deep-sea squid. What I hold in my ancient hand cannot be synthesized, she warns me. Perhaps forever, she says. And with the contempt that only a god can show, I drop the useless vial, watching it shatter on the cold marble floor.

Sam has worsened, again. Surprising everyone but me. The doctors make hopeful noises about newer, more radical methods. Devastated, Connie avoids the hospital for a horrible long week. I'm the only one sitting at Sam's bed. Who holds her desiccated dying hand. Who watches her coma-

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like sleep and gives her water through a bent straw. I never let my attention waver. Not for an instant. This is my only world, my only purpose. And I am rewarded by being present when her breathing strengthens suddenly, and her eyes come open, looking straight into my soul when she says, Stay. With me. Don't go to that other place, darling . . . not again. . . please—?

But I have to go. Just this one last time. Because the world has been conquered and my people are united, and happy, and after thousands of years, I owe them a heartfelt good bye. Yet to my considerable surprise, my advisors are standing before my great throne, waiting with the most astonishing news. Mistakes have been made, they claim. Our world is considerably larger than we ever imagined. Swift new ships have crossed the great oceans, bringing home monsters from unnamed continents, and delegates from half a dozen civilizations that are as powerful as us, and at least as sophisticated. There is so much more to do here, my people tell me. How can we face these new challenges without you? Stay with us, they plead. Sam, the Strong! Stay—!

By morning, my Sam acts a little bit stronger. She sits up in bed. She eats joyous bites of solid food. And the latest sips of blood show a cancer in retreat. I call our daughter with the unexpected good news. She brings her little boy. Then as the smiling grandmother holds the child against her frail body, Connie turns to me, and with an anger that has taken years to grow to this extraordinary depth, she asks me, Why do you have this other life, Father? Why do you have to hurt us all this way?

Why must you abandon us? my people implore.

To my wife and daughter, I whisper, I'm so sorry, darlings. So sorry.

To my nation, I thunder, I will do whatever I want!

Sorry isn't good enough anymore, says Sam. Says Connie. Then in a smooth, well-rehearsed chorus, they tell me, You need to decide, Sam. Once and for all. Which life are you going to live—?

As I watch in horror, my cities plunge into civil war. Famines and old plagues begin everywhere at once. My armies suddenly turn against each other. And over the din of battle, the multitude shouts at me, You must must *must* be fair with us!

Pick now, says my darling Sam.

Stay with us! a billion angry voices cry out.

Daddy, please? I hear. Please—?

Sam, the Weak! they chant. Sam, the Scared! Sam, the Vanquished. Sam, the Forgotten—!

You win, I tell my wife. My daughter. And a rather embarrassed nurse who wanders into this most awkward moment. This is the only world for me, I promise them, and I won't ever leave you again.

Then I go back. I step into that hot jungle clearing again. And to the sickly little people wearing nothing but skins and red dirt, I say, I am a god. Give me provisions. Now, and I will let you live. Then show me the quickest way to the northern mountains!

Thank you, they tell me. Sam does, and Connie. They kiss me and give me long hugs, neither wanting to believe that I could lie to them now, at an important, tender moment such as this. . . .

And after a year of hard marching, I enter a valley rich with iron, and I come across another nameless village, and to the ignorant children crowding around me, I say, Kneel to me! Now! Kneel! O

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DOG STARS

We joined you first around the campfires
Twenty thousand years ago. Your
Hands patted our heads, and our
Jaws and paws were on your side.
We barked and growled away the night,
Bit your enemies, and caught your food.
We made you look up to the bowl of the sky
By howling at the moon.
Before you ever got into space,
We rocketed round the earth and died
To show you the way.
And now you are going to the stars
In ships taller than any far
Hills we climbed together, in ships made hard
With the metals of the moon,
And we, who run ahead to save you,
must go soon.
Around the campfires of the stars,
In that bigger night, you will need us to bark
And keep you safe and find you the way
In the sky to still other places.
And after so long together fighting the dark,
We would be lonely and afraid without you.
We think that you would miss us too.

—Ace G. Pilkington

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THE NOISE OF THEIR JOYE

Tom Purdom

The genesis of Tom Purdom's new time-travel story occurred about twenty years ago, when the author first became interested in early music. Since then he's built a harpsichord, played a little more Baroque music on the recorder, spent ten years as a music critic and arts writer, and spent more time talking to musicians and watching how they live. Although his tale is set in early eighteenth-century Germany, the author says, "a lot of the musicians I've known would probably feel that Bach's economic arrangements and general lifestyle had a lot in common with their own daily rounds."

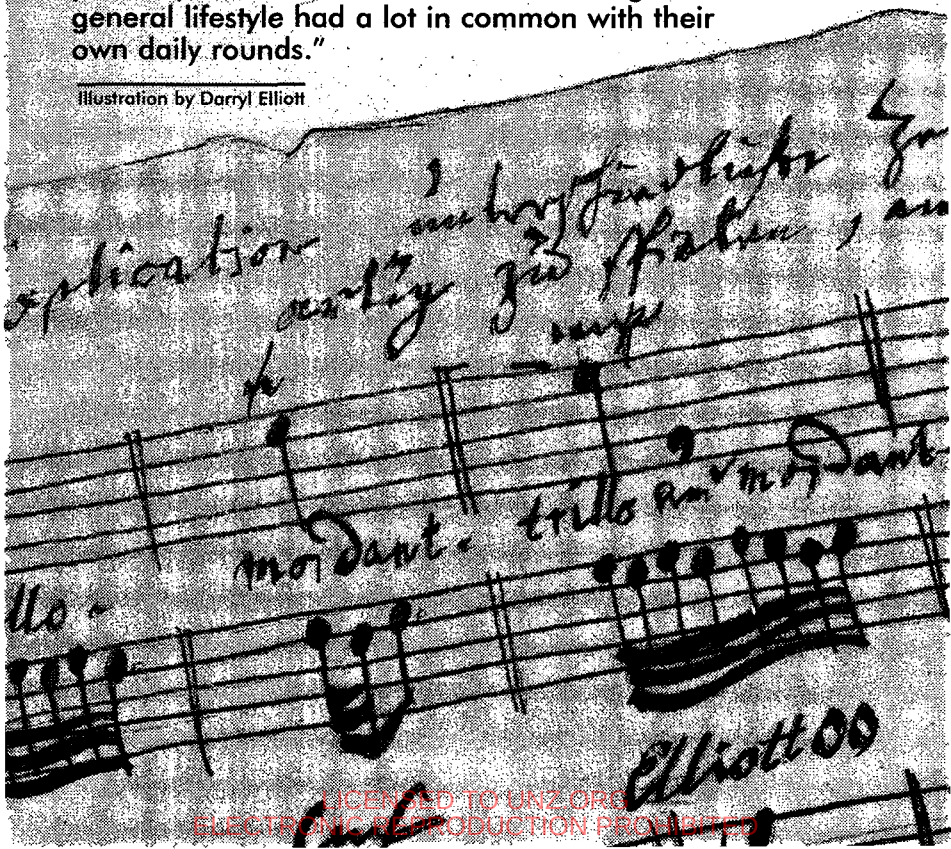

Illustration by Darryl Elliott

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Cecili was playing the harpsichord while Bach watched. Ben was leafing through the music scores arranged on Bach's shelves, but he kept glancing at Bach and Cecili merely for the pleasure of watching their faces. Cecili was fulfilling one of the great fantasies of her life. She had glowed like a winter star the first time she had spent five minutes playing in front of Bach's intent, astutely professional gaze.

Bach was enjoying a pleasure that was almost as rare. He was hearing one of his own works played by a master musician. Cecili was deliberately slowing down in places—and even missing a note here and there—as if she really were seeing the score for the first time. But nothing could change the fact that she had been born over four hundred years in the future.

Most of the eighteenth century connoisseurs who had heard Bach play had agreed he was one of the great keyboard masters of his era. Ben had heard him play twice now and he knew Cecili would have been the winner if they had ever auditioned for the same job. Bach was only forty-seven—the age of a promising young novice in twenty-third-century society—and he had become a master in an era when only a minuscule percentage of the population could become professional musicians. The "diffident young lady" sitting at the harpsichord would celebrate her seventieth birthday in just two more months and she had become one of the dominant Bach interpreters of her time because she had outplayed all the thousands of harpsichord specialists who inhabited the Earth in the twenty-third century C.E.

In person, Bach was fleshy and rather unimposing. He was wearing his wig and a full set of gentleman's clothes, but his outfit looked like most of the clothing the members of the expedition had viewed as they had made their way across northern Germany. It was formal and elaborate, but the colors of the coat had faded, the sleeves were wrinkled, and the neck cloth was a little askew. Bach was wearing real *clothing,* not a costume put together for a historical re-creation.

There were nine people in the music room. Four were members of the expedition. The others were Bach, two of Bach's daughters, and a pair of students from the University of Leipzig who had been hanging around the family quarters while they waited for Bach's eldest son, who was apparently running some errands for his father. Bach's youngest daughter, Regina Johanna, was standing beside Miriam Shaw with her shoulder pressed into Miriam's side. In another month, in October, Regina Johanna would be four. In seven more months—in April of 1733—she would be dead.

Regina Johanna didn't know why Miriam treated her with such affection, of course. She just felt it and responded.

The fourth member of the expedition, Eric Davidof, was standing beside Ben and looking at manuscripts with him. Eric was supposed to be Ben's servant but he was making no attempt to hide his interest in Bach's scores. Bach—like most people in his time—knew that servants were frequently just as cultivated as their "masters." He would see nothing suspicious in the fact that a traveling English aristocrat like "Lord Berke" employed a servant who shared his musical enthusiasms.

This was the first time they had visited Bach's music room. Bach had invited them only because Ben had insisted Cecili didn't like to play in public. Eric had almost shouted when he had seen the manuscripts crowded into the haphazard assortment of cases that lined the walls. All the scholars who had looked into the matter had agreed that Bach had kept his manuscripts together. His eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, had sold off his share

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of the collection, bit by bit, after Bach died and a huge, unknown percentage of Bach's output had eventually disappeared. Everything Bach had composed before 1732 was arranged in those cases—the lost manuscripts of the concertos and secular cantatas he had created when he had been a court musician at Cothen, the lost pieces he had written for the Collegium Musicum here in Leipzig. . . .

All they had to do was video the manuscripts with the units built into their sleeves. They had only been examining the scores for ten minutes but Bach had already given them two thoughtful looks. The first time Bach had glanced at them, Ben had been videoing a concerto score. Eric had looked over Ben's shoulder and started sputtering incoherently when he had realized the score was a *concerto grosso* that could be a lost companion to the six Brandenburgs.

The second time it had been Eric's irritated, whispered English that had pulled Bach away from the world of sound Cecili was creating. Ben was turning the pages as if he was actually studying the scores. They could have videoed twenty pieces, Eric had muttered, in the time Ben had devoted to one.

In this era, English was still the language of a peculiar people who lived on the edge of Europe. French was the common language of educated Europeans. The members of the Musicology One expedition had been given English identities so they could exchange a few words in private now and then without switching on their communications implants. But Bach obviously had an ear for the nuances of emotion.

Ben was reaching for his third manuscript when he heard the two students gasp in unison. He turned his head—still trying to look casual—and discovered Eric had grabbed a score and started flipping the sheets as fast as he could make them move. Eric's right sleeve was flying back and forth across the open pages.

Eric was a chubby, moonfaced postdoc whose attempts at conversation tended to turn into arm-waving monologues. Now his frantic arm motion was accompanied by a wild-eyed look that was probably a good sign he was succumbing to pure, one hundred percent panic.

Ben slipped his right hand into his left sleeve and wrapped his fingers around an elegant, heavily laced handkerchief. Eric was gobbling German phrases that had to sound like gibberish to Bach. He was proclaiming they had come from the future. He was claiming they were somehow managing to copy Bach's scores. Once Ben pressed the handkerchief against Eric's skin, the quick-acting anesthetic loaded into the fabric would do its work, and they could tell Bach Eric had a tendency to throw fits and fall into a faint.

Unfortunately, Eric had anticipated him and hopped behind the two students while Ben was still adjusting to the fact that one of the members of the expedition had done the one thing that should have been totally unthinkable.

"We're copying your manuscripts right now," Eric was shouting. "With a camera. With a thing—with a *mechanism*—we have hidden in our sleeves."

Miriam had earned her place on the expedition by training in eighteenth century clothes for three years. She was wearing a full length gown, with all the accouterments required of a lady of fashion, but she disengaged from

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Regina Johanna and turned on Bach in a single flowing movement. Her right hand pressed a handkerchief against the back of his neck.

The two students gaped at Miriam with the wide-eyed astonishment of people who had obviously never seen an aristocratic woman move with such speed. One of them was a beefy, rumpled-looking youth, somewhere in his twenties, who looked as if he should have been apprenticed to the local blacksmith. The other was a slight teenager who was wearing a sword with an ornately engraved hilt and an embroidered coat that would have been acceptable at the French court. He was even fondling a cane, in the best French manner.

Ben stepped toward the student with the muscles and the student lurched backward and dropped into a clumsy village wrestler's stance. He wouldn't have survived ten seconds if he had been faced with someone who was willing to kill him. He didn't know it, but the only thing keeping him alive was the doctrine that was supposed to guide every move Benjamin A.J. Berkowitz made when he found himself in a "conflict situation" in the eighteenth century.

Thou shall not kill, maim, disfigure, disable, or cause any injury more serious than a bloody nose or a few minor cuts and bruises. And we really wish you would avoid that, too.

The student would have been an easier opponent if he had been more aggressive. He would have launched an attack, Ben would have sidestepped, and that would have been that. Instead, Ben had to move in while the student was edging backward. He had to wait until the student was just a wee bit off balance and grab a handful of coat sleeve at the precise moment when he had all the leverage he was going to get. Then he had to ease the student one way while he went the other. And scrape his handkerchief against the surface of a thick, not-very-clean eighteenth century neck.

The sound of metal rasping against metal jerked Ben's head around. The student in the fancy coat had pulled his sword out of its sheath and backed into a corner with the point aimed at Miriam. One glance at the way the student was holding his weapon told Ben everything he needed to know. He stood up, confident Miriam could take care of the situation, and whirled on the older daughter before she could react. The handkerchief scraped against a second patch of skin, and he grabbed the girl's shoulders and settled her into a comfortable sleeping position.

A shriek pierced his consciousness—the startled outburst of a child in pain. Regina Johanna stumbled across the room with her head tucked between her shoulders. The student who had been brandishing the sword dropped it on the floor and lurched toward her.

Miriam moved as soon as she saw the student's back. The handkerchief brought the student to a halt and Miriam slid him down the length of her gown and pounced on Regina Johanna.

Ben scuttled across the floor and dropped to his knees beside Regina Johanna. Miriam shifted out of his way and he studied the blood and slashed cloth that disfigured the girl's right forearm. They had both received the same basic training in mayhem and medicine, but the selection programs had decided Ben should receive the advanced medical training on the agenda and Miriam should concentrate on combat skills. They were both professionally accredited security specialists but Miriam had been an authentic heavy-duty operative—a seventeen year veteran of an elite unit of the Toronto-Buffalo Metropolitan Policing Agency, complete with badge and arrest powers.

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"She was trying to help me," Miriam said. "He made this big, stupid swing—I didn't even realize she was there."

Ben checked the girl's neck pulse and verified that she had slipped into unconsciousness without any problems with the anesthetic. The sword had bitten into her arm at a shallow, almost flat angle—as if somebody had been trying to slice off a flap of skin.

Ben raised his head. Cecili was crouching beside the harpsichord with her hands poised in front of her mouth. Eric was staring at the bodies lying on the floor as if he was looking at the results of one of the mass murder episodes that had afflicted twentieth-century America.

Ben's face hardened. He was a muscular, easy going man whose square, big boned face normally looked affable and slightly amused. His personnel evaluations and personality profiles all agreed he had a marked tendency to reach accommodations and generally try to get along with everybody around him. He had no trouble aping the languid mannerisms that befitted his wig, his opulent coats, and his claim that he was a traveling English lord with a passion for music. But they had all learned they would be making a dangerous mistake if they forgot he had been placed in "administrative control" of the expedition because he was, in effect, a cop—a private-duty security officer whose day-to-day work involved personnel safety, crowd control, guard details, and all the other unloved tasks the members of his "professional specialty" lived with.

"I hope you realize," Ben said, "that you've just put an end to all the research this expedition is supposed to carry out."

Eric's arms swept across the room. "They're all unconscious, Ben! *We can record every manuscript in this room!* "

"She's going to need antibiotics. We're going to have to stay here in Leipzig until she gets a full course—three full days, to be on the safe side. Then we're going back to the North Sea. By the most direct route possible."

"It's a clean wound. I can *see* it's a clean wound. From all the way over here."

"It's eighteenth century clean. She probably hasn't washed this part of her skin in a month. There's cloth and thread all over it—eighteenth century cloth and thread."

"She's going to be dead in seven months."

"The records say she died in April of 1733. They don't say she died in September of 1732—from a sword cut inflicted by one of her father's students. I realize musicologists aren't mathematicians, *Dr.* Davidof. But you might have noticed we've been here four days already. Three more days means we'll be here two full days longer than we're supposed to stay *anywhere*."

In the seventh decade of the twentieth century, a writer named William F. Temple had written a "science fiction" story about a time traveler who visited famous artists, escorted them into the future, and let them watch the crowds that thronged into concert halls and art exhibits that featured their work. Then the time traveler had wiped the memory from their brains with a drug. The artists had enjoyed an intense pleasure and they had been left with an afterglow that carried them through trials that might have discouraged them.

A team from the Chronos Commission planning committee had found the story in one of the older databanks on the planet. Everybody had agreed that a brain wipe drug was just the thing when you were sending an expe-

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dition into a historical time period. They had liked the idea so much, in fact, that they had worked on it for seventeen years.

The process took about ten minutes per customer. First, Ben had to administer the drug that erased their short term memories before the memories could be shifted to the section of the brain that handled long term storage. Then he had to administer a second drug and carefully murmur the instructions that would fill the gap with a pleasant, simpleminded short term recall. Bach would remember that he had pulled another score off his shelves and Cecili had played it for him. The others would believe they had stood around the room and reacted with the mixture of envy, boredom, and enthusiasm their personalities would have generated if the event really had occurred.

Cecili did, in fact, go on playing. Miriam leaned against the door and watched Ben work while she listened to the sounds coming through the walls. Bach's music room was located next to the largest classroom in the Thomas School—the school associated with the Thomas Church. Thursday was Bach's free day but the head of the school, Herr Gesner, still taught classes.

Eric spent the hour videoing scores as fast as he could turn the pages. He kept glancing at Ben and Miriam as if he expected them to fall on him with drawn swords but his sleeve went on shuttling across the pages.

Ben looked his way just after he finished working on the student with the muscles and Eric actually managed to twist his puffy features into an expression that resembled a defiant glare.

"This is just the situation you wanted to set up, isn't it?" Ben said. "You forced us into this because you knew I'd never agree we should put them out just so we could video his manuscripts."

"I've got *thirty-six* Bach manuscripts stored in my recorder, Ben. Do you really understand what we've got here? I've copied thirty-six manuscripts in the time you would have copied four."

There were five researchers on the expedition and they all had their personal interests.

The senior scholar, Azalea Alvana-Ling, felt they should concentrate on collecting recordings of performances. If Alvana-Ling had been given her way, they would have attended every concert, church service, and family musicale they could horn into.

Rick Horpek—who was almost as young as Eric and just as ambitious—was a psychobiographer who was hoping he could make an earthshaking contribution to the psychology of creativity. If Rick had been given *his* way, they would have gone straight to Leipzig, put Bach under drugs, and found the answers to all the questions that fascinated psychologists who wanted to develop a magic formula that would turn them and all their friends into geniuses.

Cecili was a professional musician who wanted to listen to instruments and observe performance practice. Nari Mundara—the only academic in the group with no professional interest in music—was observing speech patterns and fitting them into the various theories linguists argued about.

Eric had originally been interested in recording performances but he had zeroed in on manuscript collecting as soon as he had seen the cases in Bach's music room. Eric, in Ben's opinion, had no permanent scholarly passions. He was merely looking for the topic that would make him a star catch when the headhunters prowled the academic jungles.

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Now, in the inn where they had set up headquarters, Rick Horpek and Alvana-Ling were making it clear they would have been very happy if they could have engaged in a less attractive form of head hunting. The journey to Leipzig had been a preliminary—a chance to test out their techniques. They had traveled north of the Elbe and kept their stops to a minimum. On the way out, they were supposed to make a leisurely progress through Halle, Cologne, Hanover, and other important centers. Then they were supposed to slip out to sea at Bremerhaven, reboard the *Chrono Explorer,* and return to their own time in the same way they had come to the eighteenth century. Decades and centuries would flow past them as the submarine hovered in the center of the Atlantic, where there was no danger their passage through time would intrude on historical events.

They had all been looking forward to the work they would do on the second leg. Rick Horpek had been planning to interview several members of Bach's extended family. Alvana-Ling had passed up several events on the way in, to save space on her recording equipment for the more interesting events they were supposed to record on the way out.

This was the first time a chrono expedition had ventured into an era in which humans had developed a civilization. The expedition had been authorized mostly because the humanists had been getting restless. The scientists had been having a wonderful time studying the evolution of pre-Cambrian life forms and the movements of the continents. The humanists wanted to have some fun, too—and they outnumbered all those dreary rock collectors at least five to one.

The musicologists had concentrated on one idea when they had presented their proposal for the first expedition to a "macro-organized era." Time travel offered them a unique opportunity. The break between Baroque music and early classical music was an unusual historical event. The change in instruments and musical styles that had taken place between 1750 and 1800 had disrupted a whole multi-century performance tradition in one fifty year period. The high-culture traditions of Asian and Middle Eastern music had never experienced such a break, in spite of the effects of the Era of European Expansion. In Europe, musicians had cheerfully scrapped fundamental instruments like the harpsichord and replaced their wind and string instruments with new, more versatile models. Venerable musical forms like the trio sonata had mutated into new forms such as the string quartet and the symphony. And then, after a hundred and fifty years, the musicologists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had attempted to resurrect the lost tradition by studying the written record and examining old instruments.

The scholars had done a remarkable job. But their best efforts had always left questions unanswered. Instrument makers could produce replicas of eighteenth-century harpsichords and short-necked Baroque violins but no one could tell them how the original instruments had sounded when they were new. No one had ever heard an eighteenth-century musician play a flute sonata and compared the actual performance with the advice and rules presented in the standard eighteenth-century instruction manuals. An expedition could bring back information that would let scholars compare the conclusions they had based on their research with recordings of the real thing.

It was a persuasive argument, in Ben's opinion, but it wasn't the primary reason the musicologists had carried off the prize. The Chronos Commission

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had considered fifty other projects that exploited the ability to make on-site recordings. It had given the pilot project to the musicologists because they had indicated they could fulfill their objectives with the minimum amount of intrusion. They could slip into the crowd at a church and secretly record performances. The aristocrats they wanted to visit were obscure, music-mad German princes. They didn't have to spy on world-shaking political leaders. They didn't have to creep around the edges of decisive battles. Bach was the only major historical figure on the expedition's itinerary. He had made the final cut, Ben suspected, because most of the bureaucrats on the commission couldn't tell the difference between a fugue and a rondo—and believed anyone who could lived on the fringes of society, where no one made any decisions that affected anything important.

Benjamin Berkowitz had been an employee of the North American Association of University Professors since the day he had finished his own post-graduate training program. The NAAUP had many virtues as an employer, but its security officers were the proud members of a department that also handled janitorial services and routine catering arrangements. The directors had put a lowly cop in charge of Musicology One because they had known they had to mount an expedition that was as clean as a sterilized scalpel. Several hundred thousand researchers had already submitted proposals for projects that would plant expeditions in most of the time periods included in the six millennia that constituted "recorded history." Several hundred thousand other academics had filed their opposition to the whole idea, on the grounds that it could have unpredictable side effects. The dissenters were the same people, in general, who usually objected to *any* technological adventure. But in this case they obviously had a point.

We are living in the dawn of the first truly civilized global society, one of the leading champions of the opposition had written. *Why should we put everything we have at risk just so we can collect conclusive proof that Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo because he was distracted by an attack of hemorrhoids?*

"It was a clean wound," Eric kept repeating. "The girl is all right. I imaged at least ninety manuscripts."

Endless mechanical repetition may not be the most rational persuasion technique humans can use, but it has its strengths. Eventually, Alvana-Ling and her young colleague decided Eric might have a point—as Ben had known they would. And it became Ben's turn to stand there repeating the same statements over and over, in the same way he had sometimes stood outside meeting rooms at academic conferences and stolidly faced down overheated protesters.

"I saw the wound," Ben's formula went. "We can't take the chance. They'll never send another expedition into a period like this if we go home without treating her."

Azalea Alvana-Ling was a dark, bony woman whose debates with scholarly challengers had created the kind of personal legend barbarian warriors had chanted around campfires in the days when humans had settled their disagreements with civilized rituals like axe duels. If Alvana-Ling had been totally convinced she was in the right, she would have been closing in on Ben with her right finger jabbing at 300 beats to the minute and her mind working twice as fast. Instead her hands were toying with the fan that was part of her costuming, and she was staying out of range and letting Rick Horpek embellish the same arguments Eric had been using.

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"We're only going to be here two extra days," Rick said. "Even if we administer the antibiotics. You're going to make us give up years of planning? For two extra days?"

Rick was almost the exact opposite of Eric—a smoothie who looked quite at home in a modish green coat, with a made-in-Paris wig on his head and a sword at his side. He could have been arguing a minor philosophical point with Voltaire.

"The security committee spent eight years setting up the guidelines," Ben said. "They didn't pick a number out of a random number generator when they decided five days is the maximum time we can spend in one place. We're already attracting attention. We were doing it even before our impetuous colleague decided he should trust his own judgment and overrule eight years of hard work. We can't stay two extra days and make a leisurely progress across the German countryside, too. By the time we get to Bremerhaven, we could be a major event."

Alvana-Ling nodded agreeably. "Can you tell us how you propose to administer the antibiotic?"

"He took care of that when he modified their memories," Miriam said. "He left them with a memory of an accident—he was showing the girl his sword and she cut herself. We're supposed to come back with a special ointment we've got."

"And they'll buy that?" Alvana-Ling said. "They'll believe a wound like that could have been created by an accident?"

Ben shrugged. "I left it vague."

"Are you sure you've really thought this through, Ben? You're telling us we have to stay in Leipzig because the girl may die seven months early if we don't. But you're also admitting we may attract too much attention if we stay in Leipzig, merely because we're giving the local citizens more time to think about us. But we don't really know the wound is going to become infected. Regina Johanna could live from now until April without any effects at all. And we could create bigger problems just by staying here the extra two days."

Cecili's hand flew to her mouth. "We can't just *abandon* her."

"She's dead, Cecili," Rick said. "She'd been dead for four hundred and ninety years when we left Bermuda. If she wasn't Bach's daughter, no one would even know she'd ever been alive."

"She's still a human being. She's still entitled to whatever life she may have had."

Cecili turned toward Eric, who was sitting in a wooden armchair on the far side of the fireplace. They had left him unrestrained for the time being, but Miriam was standing two steps behind his left shoulder. Cecili was wearing a modest, unornamented habit—a suitable costume for someone who was supposed to be a talented family hanger-on—but she still looked like a woman of consequence.

"Do you know what I've always told people when they've asked me how I feel when I play something like that sonata I was working on when you decided you had to be the greatest manuscript collector in history, Eric? I always tell them I feel like I'm swimming in one of the biggest expressions of *joie de vivre* anyone ever created. Half his music makes me feel like that. Even the ones he put together like they were puzzles. These people aren't just subjects for me to study. He's been one of the most important people in my life ever since I was a child. And then I look at that girl. Knowing what

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her future is. I look at her mother—somebody who's thirty years younger than me and already *half way* through her whole lifespan. With five lost children. And another one who'll be dead in seven months. And then—just when I know I'm giving him something, when I'm showing him a glimpse of the things his music means to people like me—what it's meant to millions of people for five hundred years—suddenly you have to turn the biggest moment of my life into an adolescent brawl."

It was an outburst that had obviously been building up since the day they had made their landfall. There was a moment—a very short moment—when Ben felt Eric actually looked embarrassed. Cecili had been the quietest person in the group, but they had all seen the emotions that had crossed her face as they made their way across Germany. They had all shared some of the feelings she was finally venting. They had worked their way through three lengthy training modules that were supposed to prepare them for the day-to-day realities of eighteenth-century life, but no training program could eliminate the fundamental fact that their emotions had been shaped by five hundred years of technical and scientific progress. They had spent their entire lives in a world in which cancers, genetic defects, and crippling accidents could be treated with a few trips to the medical center. No one in their world ever became maimed or disfigured and died at absurd ages like fifty-five or seventy—as Bach would die blind in just eighteen years. All the children born in one year lived to see the next.

We knew we'd be looking at the dead, Eric had said in one of the rare moments when he wasn't obsessed with his career. *But we didn't really understand what they would be living with while they waited to die.*

"We're not going to abandon Regina Johanna, Cecili," Ben said. "That's settled. We didn't come here to kill children—even children who aren't going to live past five."

He turned toward Alvana-Ling. "I may not look it, A-L, but I'm trying to keep all the risks we're dealing with in some kind of balance. As far as I'm concerned this is our best option. We stay the extra two days. We keep a low profile while we're here. I'll have to visit the Bach family with the ointment. But outside of that—I'm afraid we're going to be spending a lot of time in these rooms."

Rick drew himself up as if he was inspecting a member of the lower classes who had just dared to address his betters. Eighteenth-century aristocrats had a lot in common with rising young academics, in Benjamin Berkowitz's somewhat biased opinion. The aristocrats had been taught they were superior to other people because of their birth. Academics believed they were superior because they had trekked through every station on the academic pyramid, from nursery school through prime post-doctoral, and passed all the final exams.

"Are you suggesting we may have to change our plans for tomorrow night?" Rick said.

"I'm going to tell our innkeeper we have a couple of people who aren't feeling well. From this point on, we're just going to have to concentrate on avoiding notice."

"You're telling us we're going to miss our one chance to observe Bach's concerts at Zimmerman's Coffee House? You're just standing there calmly informing us you're canceling one of the major objectives of this expedition?"

Eric jumped out of his chair and waved his left arm at Miriam. "The girl wouldn't even have been hurt if Miriam hadn't gone wild and started using her *police tactics* on everybody she could get her hands on."

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"There's only one person in this room who's responsible for this mess," Ben said. "And that's you, Eric. Just you. Miriam sized up the situation and realized I probably couldn't get my hands on you as fast as I needed to. In another few seconds some of what you were saying might have penetrated some of the people standing there. Maybe it wouldn't have. But she had to make a decision on the spot. And you're the reason she had to do it. The *only* reason. If we get back home without causing any further damage, the Chronos Commission could send another expedition. They could recognize that this one got into trouble because there's some flaw in our personnel selection system that may be repairable. But they aren't going to do it if we go blundering around in places like Zimmerman's Coffee House and make a bad situation worse."

The Bachs had already started a family musicale when Ben and Alvana-Ling returned with the ointment. Bach was improvising an accompaniment on the harpsichord and his two oldest sons had returned from their day's excursions and joined the festivities. Wilhelm Friedemann was standing behind Bach's chair and peering over his father's shoulder as he sawed on a violin. Wilhelm Friedemann's younger brother, Carl Philip Emmanuel, had attached himself to a vocal group that included his stepmother, Anna Magdalena, and two of the children Bach had given her—eight year old Gottfried Heinrich and six year old Elizabeth Juliane Frederica. The two children were blending their voices with their elders' as if singing was as natural as walking—which in their case it probably was. Regina Johanna was sitting in a big upholstered chair with her bandaged limb resting on one of the arms. She was holding a doll and a piece of music paper in her lap and she seemed to be pretending she was showing the doll the score of the chorale her father was happily elaborating.

It was an impressive display. Ben had read descriptions of Bach's family musicales but none of them had captured the energy Bach was pouring into a private performance. Bach was maintaining an intense family life while he was filling the busy schedule of a professional musician who had to seize every opportunity that came his way if he wanted to earn a satisfactory living. He presented two cantatas every Sunday at the two main Leipzig churches. He conducted a weekly collegium performance every Friday and a second performance on Wednesdays in the summer. He put on full-scale cantatas for special occasions such as the visits of the Dresden court. He conducted practices for the upper classes at the Thomas School on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. He went to a seven A.M. service with the school students every Friday, gave a catechism lesson Saturday morning, and rehearsed Sunday's cantata in the afternoon. He earned fees playing for weddings and funerals, taught private students, greeted aristocratic visitors with courtesy—and somehow managed to compose all the works that had made him one of the few artists in history who could truly be considered immortal.

Anna Magdalena abandoned her music making and led Regina Johanna to the light beside a window. The bandage was a faded piece of green cloth that had obviously been torn from some remnant of discarded clothing, but it looked reasonably clean when Ben held it close to the window. It might not be sterile, but there was no evidence it had been used to dust shelves or polish silver.

They talked in whispers while Ben applied the antibiotic ointment and

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rewrapped the bandage. Anna Magdalena was an experienced mother. She could see the wound probably wasn't life-threatening. Her major concern, it seemed, was the scar it might leave on her daughter's arm.

Alvana-Ling was watching the musicale—and probably making a recording with the instrument built into her gown—but she glanced at Ben when she heard Anna Magdalena mention the scar. To Anna Magdalena it was a reasonable concern. Five of her first eight children had died in infancy, but she still seemed to harbor an optimistic belief that most of them would live.

She did, in fact, have a better future in front of her. She was going to produce five more children, and four of them were going to reach adulthood. The quarters the Bachs were living in had just been renovated. The historical record seemed to indicate the renovations had created a healthier environment.

"That's one of the major benefits of this ointment," Ben said. "In a few days—a week or two at worst—you'll hardly notice anything happened to her."

"It sounds like a remarkable preparation."

"It is. I've seen it heal wounds that are much worse than this one—which is more than I can say for many of the mixtures physicians have told me I should use."

Regina Johanna curtsied and darted back to her chair as soon as Ben gave her a doctorly pat on the head. He initiated the eighteenth century leave taking rituals by bowing over Anna Magdalena's hand and she turned away from him and picked a manuscript off a side table.

For a moment, Ben thought they were being presented with a gift—a gesture that could lead to more undesirable side effects. It was not a gift, however, but a request. Herr Bach would appreciate it if his young colleague would join him in tomorrow night's musicale at Zimmerman's Coffee House. He had already selected the program but he would be glad to modify it if Fräulein Cecili would collaborate with him in a performance of one of his concertos for two harpsichords.

Alvana-Ling glanced over Ben's shoulder. "It's his second concerto for two harpsichords in C minor," she said in English.

Ben had taken harpsichord lessons as part of his training. In the eras that had preceded the age of electronic recording devices, music loving aristocrats had always been accomplished amateurs. The manuscript he was holding in his hands was one of the standard pieces in Cecili's repertoire.

"I have a feeling it might be wise not to tempt Cecili by mentioning this," Alvana-Ling said.

Ben handed the manuscript back to Anna Magdalena. "Miss Cecili would be honored, Frau Bach. Elated. But I don't believe she could master the piece—to her standards—between now and tomorrow evening."

The music reached a cadence and came to an abrupt halt. Bach had been watching them while he played. He stood up and crossed the room with a medley of emotions playing across his face.

Ben bowed—when in doubt in the eighteenth century, bow. "I was thanking your wife for your gesture, Herr Bach. Miss Cecili will be delighted to hear that you hold her in such esteem."

"I would be a strange musician if I didn't."

"Unfortunately, I can tell you—for a certainty—that I would be misleading you if I accepted your offer. Even if she accepted—I can guarantee she would change her mind at the last moment."

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"There is no reason why your friend should be afraid to play in public. I have played this concerto with musicians who possessed a shadow of the ability she has displayed."

"Fräulein Cecili has a peculiar—somewhat original—temperament. I don't understand her feelings very well myself. But I believe most of her attitude toward public performance can be traced to an unfortunate need to achieve absolute perfection."

"She's come closer to perfection than any musician I've ever heard. My instruments are all at her disposal. She can practice on any one of them she chooses. For as many hours as she wants."

"It wouldn't make any difference. She isn't content with an *approach* to perfection. When she plays in public—she apparently reacts to every minor flaw as if it were a major disaster."

"Your friend could be playing before every court in Europe, Herr Berke."

It occurred to Ben that he should have erased a bigger segment of Bach's memories. He had left him with accurate memories of the way Cecili had played right up to the moment Eric had gone berserk.

He bowed again. "I can only tell you there is no possibility she can accept your offer. I can't even mention it to her without arousing mental anguish. Believe me—no one would enjoy the performance more than I would."

They had all been given brand new top-of-the-line communication implants just before they had finished their training. Some of the more conservative members of the security committee had tried to have communications implants placed on the forbidden list, but they had finally agreed that the expedition didn't need to worry about the possibility some eighteenth-century eavesdropper would pick up their radio transmissions. Ben's implant plinked at him as he and Alvana-Ling were picking their way through the streets that led to their inn and he subvocalized the two Japanese words that activated it.

—This is Miriam, Ben. Eric got away from me. He's left the inn.

She didn't offer any apologies or explanations and Ben didn't ask her for any. They had been through a hundred exercises in which they had fired emergency messages at each other.

—Is everybody else under control?

—So far. I'm keeping a close eye on Rick. He was arguing with me about the Zimmerman's Coffee House issue. I think he deliberately put himself where he'd be in a blocking position when Eric bolted for the door.

—Did Eric say anything?

—Not a word. He just ducked his head and charged for the door.

The members of the expedition had spent dozens of hours in simulators that had let them pick their way through eighteenth-century Leipzig at night. They had also visited the older sections of most European cities—including Leipzig itself. The simulations had been almost exclusively visual, however. The programmers hadn't included the touch of the wind, the creak of street signs, or the all-pervasive aroma of horse droppings, animal bodies, and outdoor privies built over cesspools.

As they had learned on the inbound leg of their journey, you knew you were approaching a major city when your carriage started maneuvering through a parade of market-bound farmers who were driving small groups of pigs, sheep, geese, and other livestock down the road. In the city itself,

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meat animals would normally be kept alive until it was time to slaughter them. The animals would even be killed, in many cases, right in front of the people who were going to eat them—a ritual that provoked a number of disturbing emotions in spectators who were used to eating meat that had been grown in vats.

Miriam took Rick with her when she left the inn an hour after dark. Cecili and Alvana-Ling stayed behind. Ben needed Miriam and he was confident Alvana-Ling would behave herself if he left her without a watchdog. Alvana-Ling was, after all the senior academic on the expedition. She wasn't going to give up her positions on review boards and promotion committees just because she wasn't happy with the rules that had been imposed on her.

Ben started assigning positions as soon as they joined him in front of the circular fountain in the middle of the Thomas Church square. Ben and Nari Mundara had been hanging around the Thomas School all through the late afternoon, with Ben watching the front and Nari watching the back. Now Miriam took over the rear of the building and Nari shifted to a post that gave him a good view of one side. Ben huddled against the fountain, about thirty meters from Bach's front door, and placed Rick near the front end of the church wall.

Leipzig was a bustling center of commerce and education by day, but at night it seemed dark and lonely to a visitor from 2223 C.E. The eighteenth century had been one of the last periods in which educated, urbanized men and women had been forced to operate in true darkness, without the help of streets lined with lamp posts and glowing windows. Most of the buildings that bordered the square had become dark and shuttered an hour after Miriam had arrived with Rick. The only lights were an oil burning lamp that had been hung over the main door of the school and another lamp that had been erected near the front of the church. Most of the citizens of the city would rise with the sun—maximizing daylight and minimizing the money they spent on candles and lamp oil. Bach usually rose around five or six and ate his main meal around ten in the morning.

Ben had returned to the Thomas School as soon as he had received Miriam's message, but he knew this whole vigil could be a fool's watch. For all he knew, Eric could be snoozing under a bush somewhere in the ring of parks that had replaced the old city walls when the city government had decided the walls should be torn down.

Ben had pointed himself at the academic world when he had finished his professional training because he had known he would like the environment. He liked hanging around people who cared about things like the right way to play Mozart's string trios or the long-term economic ramifications of the Taiwan-Vietnam submarine war of 2103. He had chosen a "vocational" educational program when he had finished his first sixteen years of schooling, but he had liked the theoretical subjects in his curriculum just as much as he had enjoyed his self-defense and tactics courses. He could understand why the people he was herding through eighteenth-century Germany could float with euphoria when they knew they had captured the exact sound of an eighteenth-century organ. Eric had committed a serious crime. He had terminated his academic career. But every manuscript he added to his video records would be remembered as a prize Dr. Eric Davidof had rescued from eternity. Every score Eric had videoed would be accompanied by an annotation attributing it to the Davidof Recoveries. . . .

It had been five years since the last time Ben had worked a stakeout but

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his training was still embedded in his nervous system. He snapped out of his reverie as soon as he heard the first words an angry voice was shouting in German. He scowled into the darkness and saw two shadowy figures moving in front of Bach's door.

—Everybody stay put. Just stay where you are. Let me find out what's going on.

A candle appeared in the door. The voice that was doing all the shouting was distorted by rage, but it had to belong to Bach.

—Is that you by the door, Eric? What's going on now?

—He's got a sword. He won't let go of my coat.

—Knock his hand off and run. He won't follow you.

—He's got a sword. He's holding onto my coat like he's trying to tear it off.

Ben shook his head and hurried toward the door with his hand on his sword hilt—just like a character in a historical drama.

—Miriam. Get to Bach's door. Concentrate on Eric.

—I'm on my way.

He stopped one step behind Eric's right shoulder. In the doorway, the shadows created by the candle danced across Carl Philipp's face. A white-shirted figure squeezed past him and Wilhelm Friedemann took up a position behind his father.

—Eric. Don't try to run. I'm right behind you. With my handkerchief in my hand.

Ben gestured at Bach with his white-gloved right hand and slipped into his impersonation of an English aristocrat. His left hand held the handkerchief poised behind Eric's neck.

Bach stopped shouting. He was still holding Eric's coat but he had focused his attention on the figure who had stepped out of the shadows.

"Please accept my humblest apologies, Herr Kapellmeister. I was afraid my servant might do something like this. He was born with a special kind of memory—he can look at a page and remember exactly what it looked like. When he saw your manuscripts—I think he believes he can copy some of them from memory when we reach Paris or London. And sell them to publishers."

"And what have you been doing, sir? Waiting for him here in the dark?"

"He ran away this afternoon and we lost track of him. I've been watching your door in case he tried to enter your quarters."

"And you didn't see him do it? He must have been in there for hours. My manuscripts. My scores. They're all lying on the floor. It will be days before I get them organized."

Eric somehow managed to throw out his left arm, in spite of the big organ-spanning hand gripping his left lapel. "I hid inside the school," Eric said. "He didn't see me enter because I hid inside the school before he started watching. In a closet. Under the stairs. On the second floor. I slipped inside this afternoon. Before he started watching."

Ben nodded. It wasn't hard to believe Eric would huddle in a closet for hours just so he could become the heroic scholar who copied all Bach's manuscripts. And then do something dumb on the way out and get caught.

Miriam came tripping around the side of the school, with her hands clutching her dress as if she had just been helped out of a carriage at the steps of some baron's town residence. She fell into place behind Eric and smiled when she saw her charge look back and make a little gesture of submission with his shoulders.

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Ben reached inside his coat and pulled out one of the cloth purses he kept for certain kinds of emergencies. "I'll be happy to provide you with the funds to help you pay someone who can help you straighten up."

Bach lowered his sword and stepped back. "And what will you do? Ride off with him? And introduce him to some of these publishers you've mentioned?"

Ben bowed. "You have my word, Herr Kapellmeister. My word as a gentleman who lives under the gracious sovereignty of his majesty King George II. No one will profit from this but you. I can't stop him from making copies from memory. But if any publisher reproduces his copies—I will recompense you from my own personal resources."

Bach held out his hand. He gave the purse a quick, businessman's heft and passed it to Wilhelm Friedemann. Then he took the candle from Carl Philipp and held it over his head while he peered at the three foreigners standing in front of him. The boys in Bach's choirs might have felt the pensive scowl on his face looked far too familiar.

"I will have to report this disturbance," Bach said. "This is not a trivial occurrence. There are unexplained—*unsatisfactorily* explained—circumstances. I should give Herr Gesner a full report. The town council may be interested, too."

"That's not necessary," Eric said. "I assure you. It's just something I did. A foolishness. There's no need to discuss it with anyone. Trust my . . . master's . . . word. You can have faith in his word."

Bach nodded. "Your servant seems to have a distaste for official attention, Herr Berke."

"He's had some unpleasant experiences with people who hold official positions. His tendency to engage in impetuous actions has sometimes created difficulties."

"He has an impetuous temperament? Is that his problem?"

"Unfortunately. He has many virtues. But he's one of those people who doesn't always consider the consequences before he acts."

"Just as your Miss Cecili is one of those women who has a *peculiar* temperament."

"I tend to collect companions who share my fondness for the musical arts. A true devotion to the muses compensates for many flaws."

"I understand. I should advise you, however, that I still feel Miss Cecili would be doing me a great favor if she would overcome *her* temperamental inclinations. Are you still completely convinced she can't subdue her trepidation for the brief time it would take her to play the second part in my concerto?"

"I do believe," Miriam said in English, "that someone is trying to bargain with us."

Ben rested his hand on Eric's shoulder. It was one of those rare moments in his career when he truly believed a cracked skull would have been an eminently satisfying sight.

"You and I are going to have some very long discussions when we get back home," Ben said in English.

"I've got every manuscript he ever wrote stored in my sleeve. Every thing! I got them all. All you have to do is tell him you'll get her to do it, Ben. All we have to do is get out of here."

"And what do I do later? Tell him Cecili got sick at the last minute? Has it occurred to you he's obviously realized there's something odd about us—

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something we want to conceal? What if he goes through with his threat and we have to appear before the town council? And they put our visit in the written record? Every time you go off on one of these rampages, Eric, we seem to get sucked into the kind of complications all the people who opposed this expedition were worried about."

"You're not listening to me, Ben. I've got a treasure chest stored in my sleeve."

The upraised candle was grooving Bach's face with deep shadows. His eyes caught the glint of the light as they darted from face to face. He might not understand the words they were using, but he was obviously studying their body language and taking in the emotions communicated by their voices.

Ben took his hand off Eric's shoulder and switched back to German. "I will discuss the matter with Miss Cecili, Herr Bach. I will do my best to persuade her she should overcome her reluctance."

"Then it would probably be best if I didn't mention this incident to Herr Gesner," Bach said. "I wouldn't want to run the risk anything might interfere with such an attractive prospect."

The coffee house was essentially a large room crowded with long tables. Most of the men sitting around the tables were overpowering the odor of unwashed eighteenth-century bodies with a heavy, slightly sweet cloud of pipe haze. Cecili handed her cloak to Ben and went straight to the second harpsichord Bach had placed in the performance area at the front of the room. Bach stood up to greet her and Ben gave him a polite bow. Cecili was crossing the room as if she was walking in a trance, with her eyes fixed on the floor and her hands gripping the sides of her gown.

Bach watched her with a smile that was so benign he could have been her father. She sat down at the harpsichord and Bach beamed as he surveyed the people sitting at the tables.

A servant struggled down the stairs with a wooden armchair and placed it against the wall, a few steps from the musicians. Ben handed Alvana-Ling into the chair with his best imitation of a well-schooled gentleman and settled his back against the wall. The servant reached for Cecili's cloak and he shook his head. "Lord Berke" was going to lean against the wall with his companion's cloak draped over his arm—an aristocratic caller whose party had just dropped by for a moment.

Alvana-Ling was jiggling her fan in front of her face like a proper lady of fashion but Ben knew her eyes were taking in every detail of the arrangements in the performance area. Alvana-Ling had made part of her reputation with a monograph that discussed Baroque "instrument placement"—the layouts musicians had used when they had performed in the standard Baroque settings. She had re-analyzed all the eighteenth-century paintings, drawings, and written commentary scholars had collected. She had created computer simulations that tested the acoustic and visual properties of every arrangement that had been suggested by the documentary evidence. When musicians like Cecili planned a concert, Alvana-Ling's treatises were one of the first items they pulled out of the databanks.

It might seem like a minor issue, but Ben had skimmed her monograph during one of his training sessions and realized it was a topic that combined sociological questions with practical performance problems. When musicians played in a princely hall, with a handful of aristocratic patrons loung-

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ing around them on sofas and armchairs, they didn't arrange the instruments as if they were playing on a stage in front of five hundred middle-class ticket buyers.

Normally, as Ben understood it, the harpsichords would have been set up so the two harpsichordists faced each other. Instead, Bach had placed the harpsichords side by side and angled them so many of the people in the audience were actually looking at the two harpsichordists' backs. Ten string players had been arranged on Bach's right, with six violinists and two violists standing around three music stands. Extra music parts could be an expensive item in an era when they had to be engraved or hand copied.

Cecili had spent most of the day rehearsing Bach's *other* C minor concerto for two harpsichords. She had sat in a chair with her hands poised over an imaginary keyboard and played the other concerto twenty times from memory. It had been over a year, she claimed, since she had played the concerto Bach had chosen. Her work with the other concerto, she had argued, would create some mental confusion and make her sound less agile. With luck, she might even stumble once or twice, without any faking.

Give Herr Bach what he wants, Alvana-Ling had argued. *Have Cecili do a competent job—but nothing really spectacular. He's a busy man. In another week or two, the whole episode will be just another incident.*

The first movement usually took about four and a half minutes when Cecili played it in her own era. Bach seemed to be setting a slightly slower pace. Cecili made one obvious fumble during the first minute and there was another moment when she came in too soon and Bach gave her a brief frown. Then the tempo started to quicken. A thin smile crossed Bach's face. Notes began to stream out of the two harpsichords as if they were arcing out of a fountain. Cecili was holding her eyes on the written score she had laid across the top of her harpsichord but her hands were flitting across the keys as if they had brains of their own. Bach was staring at her fingers as he played.

The two harpsichordists ended the movement with a flourish, with their hands raised above the keys and their faces turned toward each other. Bach flipped his score to the next page as if he wanted to know what came next. The string players gaped at each other before they bent their ears to their instruments and started checking their tuning.

Alvana-Ling looked up at Ben with her fan poised in front of her mouth. "There seems to have been a change in the script, dear brother," she said in English.

—This is Ben, Cecili. Are you sure you know what you're doing? You played the last half of that movement like you were sitting in a recording studio producing a definitive performance.

Cecili turned her head in his direction. She stared across the room as if she was looking at him out of a dream.

—Bach was watching every move your hands made. He's set things up just so he can watch the way you play.

The two harpsichordists poised their hands above their keyboards. Bach nodded and the slow movement opened with the light glitter of the harpsichord arcing through the darker registers of the strings.

—Don't let me down, Cecili.

Alvana-Ling gestured at him with her left hand. She covered her mouth with her fan—to hide the involuntary lip movements that could accompany subvocalization—and Ben settled against the wall and let her try an approach that reflected her experience with scholarly disputation.

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—You're hitting the wrong notes, Cecili. You're hitting everything one note to the right.

—*Hit F sharp. Hit F sharp.*

—One TWO. One TWO. One TWO.

Most Bach connoisseurs felt the concerto was one of his less successful efforts. It was actually a transcription of his concerto for two violins. But Ben had always liked the way the fast movements in the harpsichord version bounced. His personal databanks contained videos of three of Cecili's most celebrated performances. She could have played it in a crowded room with four brass bands playing four different pieces at the same time. She only made one mistake, in spite of all Alvana-Ling's efforts, and it was an error that had no effect on the performance. She was still pretending she was reading from the written score and she apparently forgot to fake a page turn near the end of the slow movement. A startled look crossed her face—as if she had just been jerked out of a daydream—and she snapped the page with her right hand and scanned the new page, without missing a note, until she found the place she was supposed to be "reading" from.

By the time she reached the end of the third movement, her partner was displaying a combination of actions and emotions that was almost as complicated as one of his exercises in counterpoint. The composer in his personality structure was nodding and smiling as if he was sitting in the audience listening to Cecili play. The keyboard artist was weaving complicated elaborations around half the notes on his score. The conductor was barking orders at the string players in musical Italian and upping the tempo every time he raised his hand to give them the beat.

Bach and Cecili threw up their hands with almost identical gestures as soon as they finished the last bar. Cecili swung toward Bach with her arms stretched out.

Bach snatched a score from the pile he had placed on the floor beside his chair. "Now play this, fräulein. Show me what you can do with this."

"It's time to go home, Cecili dear," Ben said in English. "Please tell our host you must go."

He managed to stay in character and maintain a properly languid upper class drawl. He even folded his arms across his chest and leaned against the wall with his legs crossed and Cecili's cloak draped over his shoulder.

Cecili took the manuscript out of Bach's hands as if he had handed her something fragile. "It's the third partita," she said in English. "In manuscript."

Alvana-Ling stood up. "Tell him you have to go, Cecili. This is no time to be satisfying your fantasies."

Cecili handed the manuscript back to Bach. "I couldn't possibly. You're most kind. But it would be impossible."

Bach turned around and stalked toward the English gentleman propped against the wall. Ben found himself facing the same I'm-in-charge-of-this-choir scowl he had confronted outside the Thomas School.

"There is something here I do not understand, Herr Berke. You tell me your friend is afraid to perform in public—and I see her hands flying across the keys as if they were a pair of birds. She looks at one of my manuscripts as if I had just handed her a jewel box—and you say something to her and she tells me she can't possibly play it."

Ben glanced around the room. Every head in the coffee house had turned in their direction. The string players were staring at them with their instruments dangling from their hands.

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He raised his right hand and gave the lace on his cuffs a nonchalant flip. "She is a woman of quicksilver moods. She can feel one way one moment. And another the next."

"It is my opinion, sir, that she was going to play this piece until she heard you speak to her."

Ben stepped away from the wall and dropped his aristocratic affectations. Bach was actually resting his left hand on the hilt of his sword. It was one of those moments when it was easy to remember there were incidents in the historical record that indicated Bach could be pugnacious and even quarrelsome. He had brandished his sword with some conviction last night and there was a generally accepted story that he had once drawn it on the street during an argument. He had just finished a non-violent altercation with the Town Council that had lasted a good two years.

"She doesn't always know her limits," Ben said. "I have seen her become enthusiastic like this before."

"She can't play until she herself decides she needs to stop? Do you think it matters to me if she makes a few mistakes before she's done?"

Cecili hurried across the room with her eyes on the floor. She gestured at her cloak and Ben stepped behind her.

"I really must go, Herr Bach. This has been a very affecting event for me. I have been hearing legends of your powers all my life."

"And why haven't I heard of yours? This is absurd. How can you possibly think anyone would be troubled by the imperfections in your work?"

"This was very exciting. More than you can believe. But it's not—it's not something I can do without strain. I wasn't born with the emotional qualities that make public performance endurable. It's been . . . many years . . . since the last time I played for an audience."

Ben settled the cloak over Cecili's shoulders. She was speaking very deliberately and pausing in front of every phrase as she picked her words. Bach might not be convinced she was telling the truth, but he would have to admit she wasn't lying when she claimed she was emotionally stressed.

"You have acquired an extraordinary facility," Bach said. "Did you develop all that dexterity and artistry playing in your English manor day after day? Or is there some teacher I should be troubling with a letter?"

Ben eased Cecili toward the door. "We really must go. Believe me—I can see the signs."

Alvana-Ling threw her arm around Cecili's shoulder and turned her away from Bach as if she was leading an invalid. Bach started to step toward them and Ben interposed himself.

Bach frowned. His eyes focused on the backs of the two women.

"You will be honoring us with a visit tomorrow, Herr Berke?"

"The ointment must be applied five more times."

"Of course."

"I couldn't help it," Cecili said. "I started playing. And there he was. I was playing with *him*."

Eric was lying on the bed in the room he and Ben had been occupying, sedated into grogginess. The covers had been pulled over him as if he was sick and Miriam was sitting in the chair a devoted friend might have used. Rick and Nari had been engaging in some sort of discussion but they had both shut up when they had seen the way Ben's face changed as he followed Cecili and Alvana-Ling into the room.

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"I thought I could do it," Cecili said. "I had it all clear in my mind. I really did. But my hands wanted to do something else."

Rick smiled. "I take it our artistic colleague gave a better performance than you expected."

"She played like she was giving him a demonstration of the kind of things people would do with his music in the future. Was that it, Cecili? You couldn't resist showing him the future? Like that character in that story?"

"I don't know what I was doing. I just couldn't play it wrong. Not with him watching. It happens that way. My hands . . . especially when it's Bach. Something outside you takes over."

Alvana-Ling had thrown her fan on a chair and marched straight to the table they had loaded with bottles and solid, eighteenth-century German snack food. She turned away from the table with two healthy glasses of wine and distributed one glass to Ben and the other to Cecili.

"You're creating a totally useless fuss, Ben. I can understand how you feel but there isn't anything you can say that's going to do you or her any good. You've spent your whole life shepherding scholars and scientists. You're almost one of us yourself. Believe me—there's no way you can predict what people in the arts are going to do. I've spent a significant part of my career associating with artists—dead and alive. I don't care how businesslike and likable a particular artist happens to be 95 percent of the time. There's no way *they* can predict what they're going to do."

"Is your ointment making any difference?" Anna Magdalena asked. "Can you tell if it's having an effect, Herr Berke?"

"I'm going to give her two more applications. But I'm only doing that as a precaution. The physician who sold me this ointment said it acted on the humors that inflame wounds. Sometimes tiny remnants of the humors remain if you stop the applications too early. If you don't apply the ointment ten times, the humors may recover from the effects and spread."

Ben knotted the cloth that held the bandage in place and released it with a flourish. Regina Johanna curtsied as soon as she jumped out of the chair and her mother immediately sent her to the kitchen, to work on her share of the dinner preparations.

"My husband apologizes for not being here," Anna Magdalena said. "He has his drudgeries, too. Right now he's teaching a catechism class."

"Please tell him I understand perfectly. Your husband is a notably industrious man."

"He is very taken with Miss Cecili's accomplishments. He has asked me to present you with something he calls a small gift created out of gratitude for your concern for our daughter. And in awe of your young friend's prowess."

She bustled to a table a few steps from Regina Johanna's chair. When she turned around, Ben found himself looking—once again—at a hand holding a stack of music paper.

There was no cover page. Bach hadn't even bothered to pen in a title. He had written the date and his name at the top of the first page and then proceeded to fill staffs with notes.

There was no indication of the instrumentation. Ben had to run his eyes over most of the first four pages before he realized he was looking at a composition for harpsichord: a prelude and fugue followed by two eighteenth-century dances—a bourree and a gigue.

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"My husband didn't spend a single hour in our bed last night," Anna Magdalena said. "He would like you to tell Fräulein Cecili he wanted her to have a work that would be more worthy of her abilities than the effort she played last night."

In the organ loft of the Thomas Church, Bach was spending his Saturday afternoon rehearsing the musicians who would perform the cantata scheduled for the Sunday service. A boy was singing a soprano aria as Ben paused on the top of the stairs that led to the loft. The eight string players crowded into the loft were all student types, in their late teens and early twenties, and it seemed to Ben they were staring at their music stands with the intense, slightly panicky look of people who were working right at the limits of their ability. The two oboists were older men in a different class altogether: the mellow Baroque oboe was one of Ben's favorite instruments and the oboe accents he had heard as he climbed the stairs had possessed most of the gentle brilliance he associated with the instrument.

He stepped into the loft just as the soprano finished his aria. Bach turned around when he saw the musicians look up.

Ben bowed. "Herr Bach—may I trouble you with a few minutes conversation?"

Bach frowned. "I thought you would be stopping by my home this evening, Herr Berke."

"It's regarding Fräulein Cecili. And the latest fruits of your labors."

Bach nodded. He grunted some instructions to the string players and they turned over the pages of their scores and dutifully began practicing something that sounded like it could use some extra attention.

Bach stood up and Ben waited for him in front of the staircase.

"My young friend is most excited about your gift," Ben murmured. "She would consider it a great kindness if you would let her play through the suite with you listening."

Bach glanced at the musicians working behind him. He stepped back and studied Ben's face with the same close scrutiny he had given it when they had confronted each other outside his house.

"She would like to consult with me in private, I presume."

"I'm afraid so. I will be there, too, of course."

"Of course. And your servant? Your impetuous attendant?"

"Believe me, Herr Bach—that man will never trouble you again."

Bach gave the musicians another glance. "There is no reason why your young protégé should be afraid to play in front of a small, select audience. None whatsoever. She is one of the finest musicians I have ever encountered."

Ben waved his hand in a gesture of agreement—as if he shared Bach's dismissal of Cecili's alleged fears. It wasn't hard to guess the thoughts that must be running through Bach's mind. He knew there was something peculiar about the "English Lord" standing in front of him but he didn't know what it was. He had been given plenty of evidence that he could be dealing with a scoundrel. The eighteenth century was, after all, an era in which con men like Cagliostro and Casanova traveled across Europe swindling gullible aristocrats with claims they could foretell the future and practice arcane arts. But if the Englishman was a rogue—what was he trying to do?

"I quite agree with you," Ben said. "But those are her conditions. She is still recuperating from the strain of last night's performance."

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"But she can still meet with me? In spite of her exhaustion?"

"To discuss your gift with you? For that she is confident she can make the effort."

Bach gestured at the harpsichord that had been squeezed into an open space on the edge of the organ loft. "Then you may tell her I will see her here this evening. I will be practicing the organ here. The harpsichord is more than adequate."

Cecili slipped into her trance-mode as soon as she heard Bach interweaving the voices of a fugue. In the loft, above the darkened church, Bach was playing by the light of two candles he had inserted in holders that flanked the score. He nodded at Ben and Cecili when they reached the top of the stairs and Cecili placed herself behind his bench and focused her attention on his hands.

Ben turned his back on the two musicians and rested his fingertips on the rail that ran around the loft. He peered into the darkness below him and picked out Miriam's shadowy figure gliding down the center aisle. She glanced up at the loft when she reached the forward pew and started moving along the front of the church.

—Fifth pew left, Miriam said. There's someone hiding under the pew. I could just see some leg.

—Got it. Fifth pew left. Take your time. I've got two people up here who are totally absorbed in music.

The fugue reached its final cadence while Miriam was still making her rounds. Ben turned around and he and Bach exchanged bows across the chairs and music stands scattered around the loft.

"Lord Berke."

"Herr Kapellmeister."

Bach stuffed the score of the fugue into a leather bag and carried the bag and one of the candles with him while he and Cecili transferred their operations to the harpsichord. Ben held his hand in front of his face as if he was covering an aristocratic yawn.

—How's it coming, Miriam?

—I'll have the place checked out in about three or four minutes.

—I think I'd like to give them a few minutes. It might be wise to wait and see if he's got any other surprises in store for us.

Bach stuck his candle into an upright holder near the harpsichord and dropped into a chair on the left side of the keyboard, where the page turner would normally sit. He placed his bag on the floor and rested his hand on Cecili's shoulder.

"Just go ahead and play," Bach said. "Just let me hear how it sounds to you."

Bach's hand lingered on Cecili's shoulder while she arranged the score across the top of the harpsichord. It wasn't the first time Ben had detected a slight hint that Johann Sebastian Bach might have found Cecili slightly less interesting if she had been a male virtuoso. As far as anyone knew, Bach had been a faithful and devoted husband. But he had also been the kind of husband who disbursed twenty pregnancies on two wives.

"Learn what you can, Cecili," Ben said in English. "Forget I'm here. Enjoy yourself."

—I'm under the loft, Miriam said. One detection, as reported. Tell me when you want him neutralized.

Bach nodded encouragement as he listened to Cecili play the first bars of

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his fugue. She reached the entrance of the second voice and he stopped her with a wave of his right hand.

"Not quite. Like this—"

Bach shoved his hands at the keyboard and Cecili leaned back to give him room. Ben was too edgy to notice the difference between Bach's version of the entrance and Cecili's, but the interruption apparently meant something to Cecili.

"Oh yes," Cecili said. "Of course. Thank you."

—We've got a visitor, Ben. I believe it's young Carl Philip Emmanuel himself. He just slipped in the door. Quietly.

—It sounds like Bach didn't think he should be alone with us. Can you take him?

—I'm giving him my most fetching curtsy. Say when.

—Do it.

Ben eased himself away from the railing and maneuvered around a pair of interlocked music stands. He had two choices. He could get at Bach's neck by reaching across Cecili or he could go around the pointed end of the harpsichord—the tail, in the jargon he had picked up during his training—and approach Bach from the front.

—Done, Miriam said.

Bach had stopped Cecili again. "It is very good in certain ways. Very good. The fingers hit all the right keys. But you are playing as if you were following a plan you learned in a book. The fugue is not a practice exercise. On the organ, it should be a great building you are constructing with your own hands. On the harpsichord, it should resemble a small, elegantly constructed palace."

It was an astute observation. Cecili had learned to play all Baroque music from a book. She had read many of the original sources herself, and she had studied with teachers who had read all the others. She always tried to add her own individual touch to everything she played—just as real Baroque musicians had added their personal interpretations when they played from printed scores—but she had never sat down with an eighteenth-century teacher and had him tell her exactly how free she should be.

She turned her head as Ben stepped around a chair. "I'm afraid we're going to have to cut the session short, Cecili," Ben said in English. "I was hoping we could give you a little time, but our friend has planted a couple of eavesdroppers down below."

Cecili's eyes widened. "We just started, Ben. You said you'd give me some time with him."

"I'm sorry. I said I *might* give you some time. We have a problem downstairs."

Bach stood up and gripped his sword hilt with his left hand—a bit of body language that seemed to be as ingrained as the bow. He had been watching them, once again, with the intent look of someone who had a good feel for the emotional nuances hidden in meaningless sounds.

"I think I would feel more at ease if you stayed on the other side of the loft, Herr Berke. I don't know what you and your friends are trying to do, but there is something about it that makes me feel I should be cautious."

Ben raised his hands in front of him and edged toward the tail of the harpsichord. If Cecili had been Miriam, Bach would already be unconscious. As it was, he couldn't even be sure she'd get out of the way if he tried to lunge across her.

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"I can understand your feelings, Herr Kapellmeister. After the way my servant acted—I'm surprised you were still willing to have anything to do with us."

Ben slipped around the tail of the harpsichord. The space between the railing and the harpsichord confronted him with a tight squeeze—this was not a situation in which he could move fast—but Bach was just three good steps away.

Bach raised his voice. "Gottfried. Stand up. On the pew."

"I'm here, papa."

—It's the boy, Miriam said. The eight year old.

—Can you take him?

"There's someone in the front of the church, papa. It looks like a woman. I don't see anybody else."

—I'd better stay near the door, Miriam said. The kid might slip past me if I tried to run him down.

Bach bent over the leather bag. Ben took another step forward and stopped when he realized the object in Bach's hand was a flintlock pistol with a very long barrel. He couldn't make out all the details in the candlelight, but Bach seemed to have cocked it as he jerked it out of the bag.

"You have someone lurking downstairs, Herr Berke. You came here with an extra person. And didn't tell me."

There was a standard technique for disarming an opponent with a firearm. You kept on talking and edging closer. If there were two of you, you took turns distracting his attention, one of you moving in every time the other one started talking. When you had the gap properly narrowed, you moved *inside* the gun arm—a very important point—and pushed it off to the side as you delivered the blow that crippled him, knocked him unconscious, gouged out his eyes, or achieved the desired effect in some other equally satisfying manner.

Ben had practiced the maneuver dozens of times. So had Miriam. With the handkerchief, against a middle aged artist with no formal combat training, it should have been as foolproof as a school exercise. At the moment, however, now that he was faced with a real gun, with a real, extra-large muzzle loader's hole in the front, it didn't seem quite so straightforward. The fact that he was operating in a cramped space, with no room to maneuver, seemed to have acquired much more weight and significance. An objective observer might even have concluded that his legs were paralyzed.

"She must have followed us without telling me," Ben said. "My traveling companions tend to have minds of their own. The ladies in my party are all companions, not servants."

"You talk very glibly, Herr Berke. You never seem confused. You have an explanation for everything."

Ben edged his left foot forward—a feat that should have earned him a medal for will power. Most people, his trainers had insisted, would hesitate to shoot. But how did you know someone like Bach wouldn't squeeze the trigger by accident?

"Please step back," Bach said. "I have never fired on another human soul. I have no desire to fire on another human soul. Why don't you join your friend downstairs and let Miss Cecili and me continue our conversation while you wait outside? Is there any reason why you can't do that?"

"Shall I go for help, Papa? I can't see Carl Philipp anywhere."

Ben leaned over the railing. "Miriam, Azalea—whoever it is—will you step

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out from under the loft and let the Kapellmeister see you? I don't know why you're here, but you seem to have created a ridiculous misunderstanding."

Miriam backed out of her post under the loft and gave Bach a curtsy. Her face was obscured by the darkness, but Ben thought he saw her wince when she saw the flintlock.

—Is that a *gun* he's holding?

"I should have known it was you, Miriam," Ben said. "Will you please tell me why you felt you had to follow us here?"

If someone else had been brandishing the gun, Miriam's appearance might have given Ben all the distraction he needed. Bach did, in fact, glance over the railing. Ben did manage to edge forward another half step. But Bach was a person who had spent a large part of his professional life keeping track of several activities simultaneously. There was no moment when his attention was totally diverted.

"Am I creating a difficulty?" Miriam said. "Is there something the matter, Herr Kapellmeister?"

Bach scowled. "I will repeat what I said before, Herr Berke. There is no reason why you can't join your attractive friend down below. There is no reason why you should keep edging toward me—as you obviously are."

Cecili had been staring at them in the same frozen way she had watched the hullabaloo that had erupted when Eric had gone wild in Bach's music room. She could have reached out and grabbed Bach's arm, but that would be too much to hope for. Now she turned her attention back to the harpsichord and hit a resonant three-note bass chord. Her left hand moved up the scale from G to A to B as if she were retreating into a childish practice drill. At F—just before she completed the scale—she sat back and dropped her hands.

Bach turned his head. The gun barrel wavered to one side. His left hand started to reach across his body, to hit the keys that would complete the sequence.

It was a reaction Ben understood as soon as he saw it. To a man who was totally immersed in the world of music, the unfinished progression was as unbalancing as a chopped off sentence or a truncated visual sequence.

Bach had his professional reflexes, Ben had his. One step moved Ben inside his opponent's gun arm, just as he had done it in training, Ben's left arm blocked his opponent's attempts to bring the gun back in line, Ben's right arm wrapped itself around his opponent's neck as if he was trying to give him a hug, and his hand scraped the handkerchief against the bare skin under his opponent's wig.

Gottfried let out a yell. Ben lowered Bach's hefty body to the floor and hurled himself down the stairs. He hit the church floor just as the boy was reaching the front of the main aisle and Miriam was preparing to make a goalkeeper's save. Gottfried jumped onto a pew to get away from her and Ben closed in from an unexpected direction and applied the handkerchief.

After that, he had to move fast. With the two sons, he was merely interfering with short-term memory. In Bach's case, he had to alter day-old memories that covered Cecili's performance at the coffee house and the piece Bach had written for her. *You'll have to do something about all his memories of the new piece,* Alvana-Ling had insisted. *Otherwise, he'll just recreate it from his memory. And add something to the record that wouldn't have existed if we hadn't come here.*

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The older memories required a different drug and an entirely different technique. He couldn't just wipe them out and substitute something vague in their place. He had to interrogate Bach while he was under the drug, find out what he remembered, and gradually work out a modification that would leave his "subject" with a less impressive opinion of Cecili's prowess.

Bach and his sons would remember a session in which Bach had practiced on the organ while the sons and the three English travelers had sat in the darkened pews and listened. Bach would remember, too, that Cecili had been far less polished than he had expected when she had played with him at the coffee house. The members of the coffee house audience might be surprised when he shrugged off their praises—and Anna Magdalena might wonder why her husband's opinion had undergone such a drastic change—but Bach would be confident he had seen nothing that indicated Cecili deserved a piece written with her virtues in mind.

"I'm afraid your fan club is about to lose a member," Ben said. "Of course, you gained an exceptionally enthusiastic fan when you pulled that brilliant little trick with the scales."

"I just wanted to get this over with," Cecili said. "I didn't know if it would work or not. But at least it would get it over with if it did."

Ben looked up from the floor, where he was kneeling beside Bach's slumbering form. He had just administered the primary drug and he was watching the time on the clock display included in his communications implant. Cecili had been sitting by the harpsichord, with her hands folded in her lap, for most of the time he had been working on the memory wipe procedure.

"I'm sorry I couldn't let you finish the discussion," Ben said. "It sounded like it could have been one of the best things we brought home."

Cecili shrugged. "Is the boy all right?"

"He's fine. So's his older brother. Tomorrow we'll finish up with Regina Johanna. At this moment I'm even feeling confident we can get home without any more trouble."

"And in seven months Regina Johanna will be dead. And thirty-one years from now, her brother will be dying at just about the age I was hitting my stride."

"It's the way the world was, Cecili. It's something people had to go through to get to where we are."

"Don't you ever feel like you'd like to bundle up the whole family—Bach and his wife and all their children—and take them home with us? Don't any of you ever feel like you'd like to do that?"

Ben lowered his head and pretended he was checking Bach's pulse. Alvana-Ling had been completely correct, of course, when she had said he had spent his life working with scholars and scientists. He would have deteriorated into a psychological sludge if he had ever tried to *be* a scholar or a scientist. But he could put himself inside their heads. He could share their feelings. The worst thing about this whole misadventure, as far as he was concerned, was the fact that Eric Davidof was going to spend the rest of his life looking at the academic world from the outside. Cecili was something else. Cecili seemed to be a peculiar mixture of highly disciplined professionalism and intense emotional responses. The academics could be just as emotional, but their feelings could be fitted into a small number of familiar categories, like ambition and professional enthusiasm. Cecili's were less domesticated.

And couldn't you say the same thing about Bach? On the surface, Bach

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had put together a well organized mix of professional industriousness and domestic order. But he was also pugnacious and quarrelsome. And his response to Cecili seemed to indicate he could be swept by sudden gusts of emotion—for Cecili's abilities, for Cecili herself, for some incalculable mix of both feelings.

Alvana-Ling had claimed artists were unpredictable. But wouldn't it be more correct to say the real problem was the *range* of Cecili's emotional responses? And the fact that all her feelings seemed to be churning and bubbling right at the surface of her consciousness, where they could flare up without any warning?

Was that what it took to be an artist? Was that why Bach could turn out high-spirited court music in one phase of his life and moving expressions of Christian faith in the next?

"We could take all of them—everybody who ever lived—up to where we are," Cecili said. "We could give every person who ever lived everything we've got."

"It's an appealing thought," Ben said. "But what do you think he'd do if we really did bring him back to our time? Do you really think he could have written all that music you play if he hadn't lived here?"

"There've been four people in my whole life who've made me feel my existence really does have some point. And he may have been the one that counted most. I wouldn't be anything if it weren't for him. Every time I play anything he wrote—I'm going to see him: Trapped back here. Going blind and dying. When he's still two years younger than I am now."

"But he's not dead. You've *talked* to him, Cecili. If we can travel back here—then in some way this is always here. He's even created something specifically for you—for somebody born centuries after he died. Even if he's never going to know he did it. Doesn't that count for something? Personally, I think I'm too selfish to even think about bringing all the people of the past up to our time. If you gave me the power to do something like that—the first thing I would think about is all the things they did that got us where we are. Things they couldn't do if they were up there with us. Even if we managed to grab them all just seconds before they died—we'd still probably end up making some massive change in history and losing everything we've got."

"And I would weigh that against the fact that everything we have was built on someone else's pain. You're making a good try, Ben. I appreciate it. But you can't change the basic facts. They're here, living like this. And we're up there, living the way we do. And I'm not the kind of person who can forget it. I'm not the kind of person who *wants* to forget it."

Ben arranged the seating as if he were putting on a stage show. Cecili received a pew in the center of the church, where she could look back and watch Bach when he started playing. The three sleepers were carried to their places as if they were oversized dolls. Ben and Miriam appropriated a partitioned pew that bore the name of some town notable. When everything had been organized to Ben's satisfaction, he sprawled against a corner of the pew—giving his best impersonation of "Lord Berke"—and brought the scene to life with three deliberate claps.

Gottfried and his half-brother sat up. Johann Sebastian Bach rose from a chair in the choir loft (without wondering why he had been sitting there) and settled onto the bench in front of the organ. And the noise of a great response answered the darkness above the pews. ○

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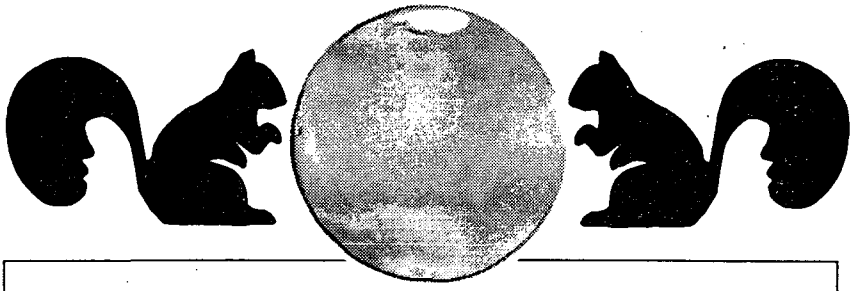

THE LAST WORD

Sometimes I am asked why
there are no squirrels in space
no squirrels in the arcologies, on Mars,
nor any of our colony ships;
chipmunks, hedgehogs, deer mice,
even *Rattus norvegicus* and
some dozen other rodentiae . . .
But no squirrels?

On Earth I gardened
as I garden here.
On Earth, squirrels dug in my bonsai pots,
bit off my sprouted corn
at the surface, dug out
my seeds.
On Earth, squirrels murdered my snap peas
for the heck of it;
Raided the hummingbirds who
did them no harm.
On Earth, they gnawed through the main stem
of the grapevine
I had carried in my lap
all the way from the slopes
of Tiryns
for a keepsake.

All this they did, unaware
that the final makeup of Earth's
zoological diaspora, the Committee's last word,
Was mine.

—Timons Esaias

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ON BOOKS

Paul Di Filippo

The Goblin Market

Alternate history of a peculiar sort can be found in Chris Gore's *The 50 Greatest Films Never Made* (St. Martin's Griffin, trade, $13.95, 233 pages, ISBN 0-312-20082-X). Founder of the famous zine *Film Threat*, Gore is steeped deeper in cinematic lore than any ten of your average critics. He shares that knowledge with us here, detailing in zippy prose such unfilmed potential classics as James Whale's *A Trip to Mars*, Peter Briggs's *Alien vs. Predator*, Hope and Crosby's *The Road to Tomorrow*, and Costa-Gavras's *Bug Jack Barron*. This fascinating peek into the dreams and machinations of Hollywood provides enough story potential for a collaboration between Kim Newman, Harry Turtledove, and Howard Waldrop.

Tiara-wearing Space Queens, UFO-seeking outdoorsmen, longevity-obsessed pill-poppers, Tampon-hoarding survivalists: all these delightful kooks and many more are arrayed for your inspection in Alex Heard's *Apocalypse Pretty Soon* (Norton, hardcover, $24.95, 360 pages, ISBN 0-393-04689-3). Reminding me of Ed Regis's books, with which they share a wide-eyed intelligent breeziness, Heard's survey of millennial madness roams the pullulating American landscape like a eccentricity-seeking cruise missile. This book will stimulate both the skeptical and susceptible halves of your brain.

From DC Comics (1700 Broadway, NY, NY 10019) arrive three books all splendid in their own unique way. *Veils* (hardcover, $24.95, 90 pages, ISBN 1-56389-355-X) is the work of writer Pat McGreal, who recounts the Arabian seduction of Vivian Pearse-Packard, prim yet curious Victorian who falls into Moorish machinations, undergoing a subtly charted transformation from stifled wife to erotic mistress. In mixed-media mode, photographs by Stephen John Phillips blend seamlessly with digital artwork by José Villarubia and paintings by Rebecca Guay to produce a never-never-land both mimetic and oneiric. In *Nevada* (trade, $14.95, 156 pages, ISBN 1-56389-518-8), author Steve Gerber (*Howard the Duck*) and his talented art posse render with zest the story of his eponymous heroine, a Las Vegas showgirl (with pet ostrich!) who finds herself ensnared in cosmic shenanigans. Present almost on every page, Nevada is an alluringly sexy heroine whose trailer-park sass proves more than a match for entropic entities such as Kewpoids and Roadfish. Finally, Jack Kirby's *Forever People* (trade, $14.95, 286 pages, ISBN 1-56389-510-2) reprints a thirty-year-old series which, while unarguably an artifact of its time, nonetheless continues to enchant. Out of the "Boom Tube," bearing the "Mother Box," five blunt-fingered youthful groove-o-nauts from the world of New Genesis use Earth as a battleground against the infamous Darkseid. Kirby's legendary manic energy explodes off every flawlessly composed page, as characters hurl non-idiomatic declarations of challenge and rebuttal at each other. As

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Sonny Sumo says, "Strange—how it fills me with thoughts of AWARENESS—LIFE!"

NBM (185 Madison Avenue, Suite 1504, NY, NY 10016) produces graphic albums of a more avant-garde nature than DC. The first volume in a trilogy titled *The Fallen, The Pale Door* (trade, $8.95, unpaginated, ISBN 1-56163-233-3) showcases the savagely overpainted photography of Miran Kim, with text by David Aaron Clark. The tale of occult doings among New York's S&M demimonde, the story relies on the intriguing chemistry between savvy tattoo-artist John Savory and a young woman named Rena, who suffers a brutal rape and beating as the story opens. Transfigured by her ghastly experience, Rena seems poised at the first volume's end for an even deeper descent into supernatural madlands.

Multitalented avant-popster Mark Amerika hosts an intriguing website named **www.altx.com**. There (or at PO Box 241, Boulder, CO 80306) you'll find ordering information for his new CD, *PHON:E:ME*, an exuberant, euphoniously discordant slab of electronica. Tiresian spoken words by Amerika consort with a melange of bizarre noises by Erik Belgum. Moans and growls, whistles and gurgles, squawks and clankings, burps and wheezes, gulps and drips, all conspire to produce an eerie music that mixes Emergency Broadcast Network with Tom Waits, opening the doorway to a parallel universe of sound.

Combining the brilliant nonsense of Groucho Marx with the surreal epigrams of Andre Breton, blending two parts Mark Leyner with three parts William Burroughs, the spontaneous bop prosody of Steve Aylett homes in straight for the limbic levels of the brain, while leaving cometary trails across the cortex. The short stories in *Toxicology* (Four Walls Eight Windows, trade, $12.95, 140 pages, ISBN 1-56858-131-9) range from prose poems such as "If Armstrong Was Interesting" to savage Wodehouse pastiches ("Dread Honor") and droll Kafka recastings ("The Met Are All for This"). Revisiting in several pieces the deranged city of Beerlight featured in *Slaughtermatic* (1998), Aylett writes scripts for episodes of *Mayberry, RFD,* where the whole cast is sorted on whizzers and E. Read this one while listening to any Robyn Hitchcock album, and you may never return to the seat you left behind.

In her first novel, *Memoirs of a Female Messiah* (Entwhistle Books, trade, $14.00, 195 pages, ISBN 0-934558-24-8) the musically adept Cindy Lee Berryhill writes with the same boldly perverse sweetness that marks her five albums. Sounding on the printed page like a mix of Lynda Barry and R. A. Lafferty, Berryhill tumbles us through one hectic week in the life of the free-spirited Michelle Domingue, who discovers upon recovering from a near-death experience that her vatic pronouncements can now shatter and mend human minds. Playing artfully with time and space, Berryhill sends her grrrl-savior, a mix of Shirley Maclaine, Madame Blavatsky, and Chrissie Hynde, on a bicoastal pilgrimage that will leave you dizzy with laughter, yet pensively contemplating such thoughts as "Was Jesus a disguise God would put on to visit us little folks?" Get your gospel today from Entwhistle at PO Box 232517, Encinitas, CA 92023.

Loompanics Books (PO Box 1197, Port Townsend, WA 98368) continues to stand as a bastion of free, albeit occasionally wild-eyed speech. Two recent publications appeal to the hacker and cyberpunk outlaw in all of us. Victor Santoro's *21st Cen-*

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tury Revenge (trade, $15.00, 148 pages, ISBN 1-55950-191-X) compiles many nasty tricks to inflict on the villains in your life, including, of course, internet harassment. On the flip side is John Newman's *Identity Theft* (trade, $12.00, 98 pages, ISBN 1-55950-195-2), more a defensive manual than an offensive one, detailing how dossiers on individuals are compiled and misused, and offering cautionary steps to secure your paper self.

Fedogan & Bremer (3721 Minnehaha Avenue South, Minneapolis, MN 55406) are a class act. Producing handsome books from authors who might otherwise get lost in publishing's Red Queen's Race, they fulfill a vital function much in the manner of Arkham House. One of their new titles is Basil Copper's *Whispers in the Night* (hardcover, $27.00, 271 pages, ISBN 1-878252-40-2), and a fine collection this is. Much like Hugh Cave, Copper is the consummate pro, able to turn out such short firecrackers as "The Grass" or long leisurely novellas like my favorite, "Wish You Were Here," where life in a palpably real small English town happens to involve anachronistic mail from corpses, erotic tensions among the prim mansion set, and ghastly attics. Polish up on your Copper now!

Although ostensibly a journal, the fat perfect-bound annual called *Gargoyle* (Paycock Press, trade, $10.00, 365 pages, ISBN 0-931181-06-2) can more accurately be viewed as a massive feast of an anthology, compiled with superior intelligence and taste by Lucinda Ebersole, Richard Peabody, and Maja Prausnitz. Number 42 features a smorgasbord of poetry and fiction, with a few appetizers of non-fiction, and should appeal to all fans of bang-up avant-pop writing. Among the poems, I particularly enjoyed Billy Childish's "Sex Crimes of the Future" ("male hands will crawl across nursery floors/like monkey paws") and Duncan Fallowell's "Rainbow Party/ Fuschia's Song from *Gormenghast*" ("Yellow eyes glow/Under lids indigo;/Shoulders are spangled with meteor dust;"). Christopher Fowler's disturbing story "Normal Life" is a stark "biter bit" piece, while Hugh Fox's "The Giant Christmas Oyster" provides loony holiday fun. Visit **www.atticusbooks.com** to claim your own pet *Gargoyle*.

Adventurous, brave, compassionate, playful: these adjectives only begin to describe the stories of Peter Crowther, whose extraordinary talents also manifest when he's wearing his editing and reviewing caps. From Cemetery Dance Publications (PO Box 943, Abingdon, MD 21009) arrives *The Longest Single Note* (hardcover, $40.00, 380 pages, ISBN 1-881475-56-5), a generous gathering of Crowther's superb stories, supplemented with his chatty endnotes. From the non-supernatural gruesomeness of "All We Know of Heaven" and "Shatsi" (one of the stories making their first appearance here), to the Kathe-Koja-style weirdness of "Head Acres" and the Ellisonian power of "Cankerman," Crowther exhibits a determination to mine the depths of "horror" for more than common resonance. In terms of the music he loves, Crowther is a daring amalgam of Nine Inch Nails, Brian Eno, and Roky Erickson. However, when collaborating with James Lovegrove, Crowther sounds more like some classic *Weird Tales* author. Their novella, *The Hand that Feeds* (MSP, chapbook, £5.00, 64 pages, ISBN 0-9536066-0-0) recounts the trials of a band of Secret Masters engaged in a violent struggle with an odd demon called an Umbra Djinn, and is a tale that might have surged from the pen of Robert Bloch. Contact MSP at **www.epress.force9.co.uk**.

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Shadowland

Eric Brown has seven books available in his native UK, and not a single title here in the US. That seems a shame, since he's a fine writer in the mold of such postmodern space-operaticists as Simon Ings, Alexander Jablokov, Paul McAuley, and Stephen Baxter. Brown's work is not as thickly recomplicated or as ideationally scintillating as that of his stellar peers—in fact, it's a tad old-fashioned in spots—but he still provides a deft and thoughtful recasting of what's come to be called "hard-core SF."

Penumbra (Millennium, mass-market, £5.99, 346 pages, ISBN 1-85798-592-3), Brown's latest, is set roughly 150 years from now, during a time of interstellar human colonization termed the Expansion. The narrative runs on dual tracks that eventually converge in an emotionally and logically harmonious fashion.

In space, we meet Josh Bennett, orbital pilot, a man with certain niggling problems who's basically stuck in a boring rut. Circumstances swiftly propel Bennett and his co-pilot, the mystically enigmatic Ten Lee Theneka, into the arms of Charles Mackendrick, rich businessman with a daring proposition for voyaging out to a strange world —Penumbra—on the Rim of the Expansion sphere. On Earth, in a decaying Calcutta, we become familiar with detective Rana Rao, a self-sufficient young woman whose curious past holds the key to the success of the Bennett-Mackendrick expedition. If only Rao can survive the ministrations of the serial killer she's tracking—

Brown moves through his moderately convoluted story with grace and intelligence and real affection for his characters. He can strike a lyrical note, as with his description of FTL travel ("[t]he stars had turned to streamers and were hosing toward and around the ship like a bombardment of polychromatic flak"), and conjures up such images as the occluded planet of Penumbra with concise strokes. In fact, his writing helps you glide over a few logical potholes. Can "draconian energy conservation" on Earth really be reconciled with a flourishing orbital economy? Why has Calcutta not advanced a whit beyond our times poverty-wise when every interstellar colony owns something called a "manufactory" that can reproduce minimal civilization from scratch? Can't a few manufactories be plunked down in India? And is a human at eighty years old still really "ancient" in the twenty-second century?

Brown also likes recycling his share of old icons. Mackendrick is none other than Heinlein's W. W. Harriman, and the visitors to Penumbra instantly takes sides in a local civil war just like the crew of the *Skylark*! But such antique furniture, like that comfy old sofa you can't bear to toss, truly does make a home feel more welcoming, and Brown earns his audience's esteem.

Anarchy in the UK

Another British writer just now taking his initial bows before a US audience is Ken MacLeod, author of three linked books that limn a future history nearly as convoluted as Baxter's Xeelee sequence. Tor Books has wisely chosen to publish MacLeod's latter two novels, although puzzlingly out of sequence. *The Cassini Division* (hardcover, $22.95, 240 pages, ISBN 0-312-87044-2) appeared in 1999, with its narratological predecessor, *The Stone Canal* (hardcover, $24.95, 320 pages, ISBN 0-312-87053-1) showing up

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nearly a year later. I can see Tor's reasoning: *Cassini* is a more impressive debut, a jazzed-up version of what MacLeod specked-out in *Canal*. But it does help to read *Canal* first.

Like Brown's *Penumbra*, *Canal* runs on a split screen. One flow begins in the 1970s, where we share the political passions and career aspirations of college chums and rivals Dave Reid and Jon Wilde. Fervently radical, happiest when experimenting with anarchy, libertarianism, communism, and other strange political lifeforms, the pair will, over the next 120 years (longevity treatments intervening), find themselves at the center of the change-ripples spreading over Earth. By the time this branch of the narrative ends, mankind has colonized the solar system, and a rogue faction of extropians have formed a posthuman consciousness on Jupiter, simultaneously opening up a wormhole to parts unknown.

The alternating sections of the novel take place in the 2400s on New Mars, mankind's only colony, which we learn lies on the farside of the wormhole. There, Reid and Wilde, in various old and new incarnations, continue their battle, centering this time around the legal status of machine intelligences. New characters, including the charming and feisty ladies Tamara Hunter and Dee Model, spice up the pot, which bubbles toward a satisfying resolution.

Not scanting his quite believable and sympathetic characters, MacLeod's forte is socio-political speculation, and he does it at least as well as Stan Robinson in his *Mars* trilogy, evoking a future so intriguingly different from the shoddy "Federation" off-the-shelf crap in most SF that one suspects MacLeod of being a Jovian alien himself. Another strong strain in his work is a kind of Lem-Rucker cybernetic goofiness. The machine known as Jay-Dub rivals any of Rucker's Boppers for eccentric thought-processes. Finally, MacLeod has mastered van Vogtian plot-recomplication to good effect.

From its recursive chapter titles onward, *The Cassini Division* announces itself as a bold gambit in the decades-long dialogue science fiction has been having since the days of Heinlein about the most probable future for mankind. Set shortly after the latest events of *Canal*, *Cassini* focuses on the post-Jovian history of the solar system that was only sketched in the earlier book. Our protagonist is Ellen May Ngew-thu, a hard-minded, long-lived soldier in the eponymous regiment set up to monitor the Jovians and their wormhole. The strange yet flourishing anarchistic milieu she inhabits is the result of a startling number of past disasters that the race barely survived, and Ellen is intent on making sure no future catastrophes harm her utopia. This defensive program ultimately involves a trip through the wormhole to New Mars, where we get to see the results of the earlier struggle between Reid and Wilde.

Cassini roars by like early John Varley, tossing off wonders left and right. A typical passage involves Ellen's accepted way of receiving messages from home: "She passed me a small vial containing a culture of nanomachines on which the incoming laser communications had been recorded and decrypted. My suit ate it, and played the messages over my eyes." MacLeod makes all this seem inherently reasonable, yet utterly magical, and succeeds in depicting a future that feels simultaneously exotic yet immediate.

Engaged, ingenious, and wittily partisan, Ken MacLeod is a one-man revolution, SF's Billy Bragg.

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A Soldier's Wages

Maybe for you it was Heinlein's *Glory Road* (1963). Perhaps it was Keith Laumer and Rosel George Brown's *Earthblood* (1966). Or could it have been Andre Norton's *The Zero Stone* or Samuel Delany's *Nova* (both 1968)? For latecomers, maybe John Varley's *The Golden Globe* (1998) did the trick.

I'm trying to summon up an image of the first expertly crafted book of wild cosmic adventure you encountered that opened up your eyes to what a widescreen baroque canvas the galaxy represented. Mixing pathos and beauty with huggermugger and derring-do in various proportions, these novels are frequently *bildungsromans*, sending youthful protagonists out to learn just what they and the universe are made of.

I can guarantee you that right now some wide-eyed, unjaded reader of whatever chronological age has glommed onto William Barton's *When We Were Real* (WarnerAspect, mass-market, $6.99, 337 pages, ISBN 0-446-60706-1) and is racing through its thrilling text, experiencing the same sensations you brought to, say, Cordwainer Smith's *Norstrilia* (1975).

Smith is a good entrypoint to Barton's book, since he's one of the two authors invoked in Barton's dedication. (The other is the less well-known Anna Kavan.) Barton loves to riff on past science fiction (consider a minor character here named "Regis Gosseyn"), and his human-dominated interstellar empire of a thousand years hence features "optimods," artificially bred transgenic sentients that play the role of Smith's underpeople. Barton's (anti-) hero, Darius Murphy, whose distinctive, incantatory voice carries us easily along, falls in love with one of these unfranchised creatures, the Leiberishly sexy fox-woman named Violet. Mostly together—with a startling gap of a century, during which Murphy's solo adventures range across a wider spectrum—this pair serves distant masters as spaceship pilot and gunner in a series of obscure wars, until a final climactic battle.

Like Smith's Instrumentality, the elite contending factions of Barton's interstellar community operate on levels completely obscure to the drudges and grunts. Trapped by economic and caste expectations, Murphy and Violet experience the underside of their galaxy, enduring war and torments to uphold minute issues of policy. Barton is not a believer in good guys or bad guys, and all his factions exhibit mixed natures, as does Murphy himself.

A notable facet of Murphy's conflicted self is his sexual attitudes. As usual, Barton is unflinching in his portrayal of human sexuality. Raised in a repressive matriarchy, Murphy struggles all his life with the proper attitude toward women, ending up victim of the mating game as often as exploiter. This red thread of passion lends the strongest continuity to Murphy's scattered adventures.

Like Eric Brown's book, Barton's exhibits a few logical inconsistencies that might be quibbled with. The ships that tie the empire together travel at sublight speeds, raising issues of objective and subjective time that don't always quite jibe. Yet communications seem to partake of FTL features. Also never explained is why practically all of the human-settled worlds are "steel beaches" of one sort or another. No natural world was ever found suitable for colonizing?

But these minor glitches cannot halt nor hinder the headlong rush of Darius Murphy's fascinating self-exploration across a realm almost too harsh for love, the only emotion that ultimately defines "being real."

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Snakes and Ladders

Make a space on your library shelves next to Gore Vidal's *Messiah* (1954) and Robert Coover's *The Origin of the Brunists* (1965) for Melvin Jules Bukiet's *Signs and Wonders* (Picador, hardcover, $26.00, 376 pages, ISBN 0-312-20009-9). This millennial danse macabre ranges from bitter farce to hilarious tragedy, concluding with a satisfyingly thoughtful punchline.

Snakes Hammurabi is a mid-level criminal in Hamburg, Germany, who has a problem with God. Raised by a spiritually fanatical father, he has reacted in adulthood by embracing a half-hearted atheism that culminates in his urinating one winter's night upon a church's altar. Arrested for this piddling crime (sorry!), Snakes expects to spend a night or two in jail, then be released by his employer, the Faginesque Peddler. Instead, he is thrown to rot into a large cell aboard a floating hellhole prison. There his comrades are eleven various unrepentant killers, plus one enigma. The enigma goes by the name of Ben Alef, and is an ageless voiceless cipher, crime unknown, who bears upon his wrist a Nazi deathcamp tattoo.

One night a tremendous storm scoops up the floating prison and drags it out to sea. Near the point of drowning, the twelve cellmates are rescued by a miracle. Ben Alef becomes active upon contact with fresh air and seawater and enables the men to walk across the top of the raging waters to land. There they enlist Max Vetter, a fisherman who is the first civilian witness to Ben Alef's miracles, and ultimately a pivotal figure. From this point on, all heaven breaks loose. Ben Alef's serene presence accumulates a crusade that threatens during these waning weeks of our century to topple power structures everywhere.

Ben Alef's career roughly parallels the life of Jesus, and a good part of the pleasure of this book is Bukiet's simultaneous adherence to and deviation from the Gospel. By the time Ben Alef's mortal father says, "Forgive me, Son, I know exactly what I do," we have reached some kind of revisionist epiphany. Bukiet never firmly reveals whether Ben Alef is the real Messiah or not, contrasting such revelations as the faking of his deathcamp tattoo with such objective miracles as the new Messiah's ability to cure harelips and revive corpses. Necessarily, we never get inside the Messiah's head, deriving most of our impressions from his loyal Snakes. In fact, so infuriatingly attractive is the character of Snakes that when he's offstage, the book tends to lag a bit.

Ben Alef's fated end at the hands of a certain major corporation is undeniably a gaudy enough climax, leaving his followers adrift in the new millennium. It might have proved more interesting to follow an unmartyred Ben Alef into this brave new world, but Bukiet's resolution nonetheless launches its survivors outward like hopeful seeds.

Gnarl and Sex and Death

Can you twink Rudy Rucker? Twink is a word Rucker coined "to mean thinking or praying or somehow summoning up the replica-model of another person in your own head." If you don't have sufficient lines of code yet to do the job—and even if you do—I suggest immediately adding two new Rucker cartridges.

First off, plug into *Seek!* (Four Walls Eight Windows, hardcover, $35.00, 364 pages, ISBN 1-56858-133-5), the collected non-fiction. Drawn from a variety of sources ranging from obscure fanzines and unpublished notes to *Wired* maga-

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zine and the *SFWA Bulletin*, these essays cover a lot of ground. The three sections of *Seek!*—"Science," "Life," and "Art"—correspond roughly to Rucker's chosen trinity that serves as my heading. "Gnarl" might need some explaining: that's Rucker's term for the interesting borderzone between chaos and stagnation, the realm of complexity where life and information flourish. Rucker searches out the most interesting niches of gnarl in such subjects as cellular automatons, the paintings of Bruegel, Times Square peep shows, the necessary tenets of mysticism, and the personality of his family's dog. Whether cast as travelogues, journalism, musings, speculations, or autobiography, these essays offer intimate insights into both Rucker's keen unique mind and the universe in which it is embedded—if they're not indeed one and the same.

Thus prepared, you are ready to swallow the rich and heady brew that is *Saucer Wisdom* (Forge, hardcover, $23.95, 287 pages, ISBN 0-312-86884-7), a unique transreal novel-cum-pop-science book. The frame narrative here involves a series of meetings between "Rudy Rucker" and one Frank Shook, an eccentric who claims to be in touch with UFO visitors unlike any known to the general public, disembodied souls who ride cosmic gamma rays from star to star. In a series of paranoid conversations, Shook details the aliens' knowledge of the universe's deep structure and their revelations about humanity's future, which to them is an open book. Rucker—twinking in parallel the mentalities of Hans Moravec, Raymond Kurzweil, Eric Drexler, and Philip K. Dick—blasts the reader with one mind-boggling speculation after another, from squishy robots to femtotech, all the while propelling the story of Shook and "Rucker" toward a touching coda of its own. The future envisioned here is one of liberating, near-utopian technologies that make the Extropians look like Alan Greenspan. If this generous, wild-eyed, yet sage book isn't mined by SF writers everywhere for revolutionary ideas, then I'm not twinking my peers correctly!

Yama's Mañanas

Perhaps it's time to revive that quaint old hybrid term, "science-fantasy." Tales of wonderful adventures on exotic planets where technology and magic mix, science-fantasy has also been called "planetary romance," a term which fits Paul McAuley's ongoing Confluence series quite nicely. Like Silverberg's Majipoor, Vance's Big Planet, and Wolfe's Short Sun, the artifact known as Confluence, a mountain-edged, Hot-Wheels-track-style world bisected by a Great River, holds enough marvels to fill any trilogy. McAuley's second installment, *Ancients of Days* (AvonEos, hardcover, $16.00, 386 pages, ISBN 0-380-97516-5), admirably continues the story begun in *Child of the River* (1997), and although it concludes literally in midair, this thrilling book both satisfies and whets our appetite for more.

Seventeen-year-old Yamamanama—Yama for short—having discovered his unique status as the last surviving Builder among the 10,000 races of his world, sets out to find further clues to his heritage and destiny. Chased by various factions who wish to use him in their schemes, including the implacable Prefect Corwin, Yama strives to travel downriver toward a turbulent warzone where answers might lurk. Accompanied by several loyal companions, Yama's journey is one of both literal movement and inner discoveries, as

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he probes the limits of his freakish mental powers.

This novel divides almost exactly in half: during the first part, Yama and friends reluctantly inhabit a mountain-sized building outside the city of Ys, where ancient bureaucracies wage civil wars and downtrodden underpeople dwell in hidden tunnels. Here Yama performs miracles that enhance his reputation and desirability as a powerful pawn. Finally fleeing, Yama and friends experience a variety of battles and testings on the Great River, culminating in treachery at the very Edge of the World (a Dunsanian venue if ever there was one!).

McAuley elegantly juggles moments of conceptual breakthrough with his action, bopping between backstory and present. Humor mixes with tragedy, and eruptions of awesome forces alternate with quiet quotidian moments in a graceful ballet. All the characters emerge as vivid creations, even if sometimes their subsidiary roles in the monomythic story of Yama necessitate their almost predestined actions. Visually stunning, thoughtfully extrapolative, this series proves that old modes can reawaken in skillful hands.

Empyrean Epic

Possessed of a Shakespearean vocabulary; anchored in mortal concerns, yet uplifted by mystical insights; pregnant with plot and fertile with characters; optimistic yet pragmatic; archaic yet modern. That's a description few writers merit, a unique literary thumbprint impossible to blur or conceal. So it's no surprise that practically anyone who encountered the "debut" of one "Adam Lee" easily penetrated the commercially mandated disguise and recognized beneath the mask the face of that SF nonpareil, Al Attanasio. In the trilogy comprised of *The Dark Shore* (1996), *The Shadow Eater* (1998), and *Octoberland* (Avon-EOS, trade, $13.50, 308 pages, ISBN 0-380-79072-6), Attanasio's distinctive tiger-bright blend of romance, cosmic struggle, and personal epiphanical transcendence, previously seen in such masterpieces as *Wyvern* (1988), roared out at the discerning reader from page one, proclaiming that here was another vivid installment in Attanasio's lifelong saga of man's gloriously sad place in the secretly structured universe.

Attanasio's inspiration for his refreshingly offbeat fantasy is not the abused shade of Tolkien, but rather the less-often-invoked spirits of E. R. Eddison and Lord Dunsany, Mervyn Peake and William Morris, George MacDonald, and Andrew Lang. In this bold stroke Attanasio conjoins with James Stoddard, whose *The High House* (1998) romped amidst the same alternate canon. But Attanasio is a superior artist, and his derivations are less obvious, concealed by a more mature creativity. In some sense, this is the perfect reimagining of our fantastic forebears that Lin Carter dimly apprehended in all his own strivings as editor and writer.

Attanasio begins by positing a hidden cosmology: above our Earth, the Dark Shore of the first volume, lie other planets, Bright Worlds closer to the Abiding Star and its radiance of a magic flux called Charm. On one such world, Irth, humans and assorted other marvelous races exist in a manner utterly alien to us. Nocturnal tides can waft unsecured sleepers off the very edge of Irth; Charm technology has largely precluded mechanical strategies; and death is far from a permanent condition. But this vibrant subcreation, conveyed with Oriental stylings by Attanasio's glamorous swaths of brocaded prose, is in danger. Med-

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dlings by wizards with the Dark Shore have opened up Irth to a madman, the revengeful Wrat, a weasel of a baddie owned by a larger power. *The Dark Shore* is the tale of the war between Wrat and his demon legions, and a host of intriguing good guys, from the highborn Drev to the lowborn beastman Dogbrick. Weaving multiple love stories with sorcery, slaughter and rebirth, this novel is a stirring pachinko game where the million marbles are such archetypes as loss, abduction, misunderstanding, amnesia, treachery, remembering, and sacrifice.

After the hard-won triumph over Wrat that closes the first volume, one naturally wonders where Attanasio will go with *The Shadow Eater*. He ups the ante considerably, by revealing more of his universe's deep structure. Above Irth broods a higher level of reality, where itchy gods debate over whether to pack away their playthings, the very Irthians we have become so enamored of (and all of us on Earth as well!). Our potential salvation from nonexistence lies in the shaky hands of a newly introduced, semicomedic character, Old Ric, a reluctant gnome, as well as some familiar figures from the earlier installment. For the first time, events seep visibly over to our world, which Attanasio's rich language ennobles in the same manner as it did Irth. Although *The Shadow Eater* resolves heartily and ingeniously, this time there is plainly more to come.

Octoberland opens immediately after the events of its predecessor. Dogbrick, easily the most engaging character of this series, a self-taught philosopher trapped in a bestial frame, has been marooned on Earth, becoming the object of a covetous evil mage named Nox, head of the coven called Octoberland. Nox knows of the plenum's magic hierarchy, and has selfish plans to flip some of its switches. Back on Irth, leakage from the godly realm above in the form of goblins meanwhile threatens to undermine all that was saved from Wrat. Bouncing back and forth between planets, Attanasio reveals the subtle interdependence of all things, how no one problem can ever be solved without attending to all of them. Only when every thread is back in place does harmony once more reign.

The ghost of Caval, a benevolent wizard, drifts through all three books. In *Octoberland*, he describes his ways: "I built a laboratory for myself in the sky. There, I gathered the very rare and most powerful Charm. . . . From there, I see everything—everything that is and all that was."

Surely Attanasio is our Caval, and lucky we are to have him. O

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

A crowded month, leading up to the big traditional conventions Easter weekend. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. - Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 2000

22-26—**IAFA.** For info, write: **Fla. Atlantic U., Dept. of Humanities, HU-50, B-9, NW 20th, Boca Raton FL 33431.** Or phone: **(954) 475-6747** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). (E-mail) **ebbs.english.vt.edu/iafa.** Con will be held in: Ft. Lauderdale FL (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Hilton. Guests will include: Butler, Kress. Academic.

23-25—**Life, the Universe, & Everything. (801) 378-2456.** (E-mail) **ltue@earthling.net.** BYU Student Center, Provo UT.

23-26—**AggieCon. (409) 845-1515.** (E-mail) **aggiecon@msc.tamu.edu.** Mem. Student Center, College Station TX. Ellison.

24-26—**LunaCon.** (E-mail) **lunacon@lunacon.org.** (Web) **lunacon.org.** Hilton, Rye NY. G. A. Effinger, Schiffman, Hambly.

24-26—**MidSouthCon. (901) 274-7355.** (Web) **midsouthcon.org.** Sheraton 4 Points, Memphis TN. Saberhagens, Daniels.

24-26—**CoastCon. (228) 435-5217.** (E-mail) **info@coastcon.org.** (Web) **coastcon.org.** Miss. Coast Coliseum, Biloxi MS.

24-26—**MillenniCon. (513) 933-0452.** (E-mail) **millennicon@mvfl.org.** Kings Island Resort, Kings Island OH. Connie Willis.

24-26—**TechniCon.** (E-mail) **info@technicon.org.** (Web) **technicon.org.** Best Western Red Lion, Blacksburg VA. Sheard.

24-26—**WillyCon.** (E-mail) **scifict@wscgate.wsc.org.** Wayne State College, Wayne NE.

24-26—**Gdansk Film Seminar. (058) 553-1073.** University of Gdansk, Poland. Horror film.

25—**Neutral Zone 2000.** (E-mail) **dlawson@darlington.ac.uk.** England. James Morrison, Jeremy Bulloch. Media.

25-26—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** (E-mail) **tickets@creationent.com.** Hofstra U., Long Island NY. Commercial Trek event.

31-Apr. 2—**GalactiCon.** (Web) **geocities.com/area51/1908/galacticon/galacticon.** Ramada So., Chattanooga TN. Sherman.

31-Apr. 2—**5Con.** (E-mail) **bkreuger@grendel.csc.smith.edu.** Seelye Hall, Smith College, Northampton MA.

31-Apr. 2—**FilkOntario.** (E-mail) **hayman@bserv.com.** Toronto ON. L. Warner, Huey, Snyder. SF/fantasy folksinging.

31-Apr. 2—**ReConnaissance.** (E-mail) **reconnaissance@fandom.no.** Grand Hotel Terminus, Bergen Norway. Iain Banks.

31-Apr. 2—**SakuraCon. (253) 535-2395.** (E-mail) **sakuraweb@hotmail.com.** Doubletree Inn, Tukwila WA. Anime.

31-Apr. 2—**Creation. (818) 409-0960.** (E-mail) **tickets@creationent.com.** Pasadena CA. Commercial Trek event.

APRIL 2000

6-9—**ConFurence, Box 84721, San Diego CA 92138. (619) 223-9482.** Hilton, Irvine CA. Rowley, Beiro. Anthropomorphics.

7-9—**ICon, Box 550, Stony Brook NY 11790. (516) 632-6045.** (E-mail) **info@iconsf.org.** State Univ. S. Baxter, J. Lansdale.

7-9—**ConTraption, Box 214055, Auburn Hills MI 48321. (810) 853-0736.** (E-mail) **jimo3@aol.com.** Detroit MI. G. Stanley.

7-9—**Darkside, 30 Runnymede Rd., Yeovil Somerset BA21 5RX, UK. (07971) 025-392.** Sherborne Hotel, Dorset UK. Media.

14-16—**OpCon, Oak Pk. River Forest High School, 210 N. Scoville, Oak Park IL 60302.** (Web) **oprfhs.org/activ/scifi/opcon.**

15—**StarFest, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 757-5850.** (E-mail) **starland@starland.com.** Commercial Trek event.

20-23—**NorwesCon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 270-7850.** (E-mail) **info@norwescon.org.** Doubletree Airport.

20-24—**SwanCon, Box G429, Perth WA 6892, Australia.** (Web) **swancon.iinet.net.au.** Ascot Inn, Ascot WA. C. Willis, Nix.

21-23—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737.** Omni. The Pinis, the Burnside-Clapps, Stiles, Haney.

21-23—**MiniCon, Box 8697, Lake St. Stn., Minneapolis MN 55408** (E-mail) **request@minicon35.mnstf.org** Hilton. McHugh.

21-24—**UK Nat'l. Con, 30 Woodburn Terr., St. Andrews KY16 8BA, UK.** (E-mail) 2kon@dcs.st-and.ac.uk. Glasgow UK.

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NEXT ISSUE

JUNE COVER STORY

Multiple Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress**, one of our most popular writers, returns after too long an absence with a major new novella, our lead story for June, "Savior"—the intricate, compelling, and provocative story of an enigmatic visitor from the depths of space, sent here on a mission no one understands . : . a story, seen through the eyes of a large and vividly drawn cast of characters, that spans several generations of future history, as the human race struggles to understand the mute, mysterious alien presence, before it's too late . . . urged on by the growing realization that the clock may be ticking, in more ways than one. . . . Don't be surprised to see this one on award ballots next year, and don't miss it!

OTHER TOP-FLIGHT WRITERS

Our Internet columnist, Hugo-winner **James Patrick Kelly**, takes us to the weird and wonderful world of wired entertainment (try to say that five times fast!), a plugged-in, switched-on future that may be just around the corner, for the exciting story of those who live to "Feel the Zaz"; critically acclaimed British writer **Ian R. MacLeod**, whose novella "The Summer Isles" was one of last year's most popular stories, returns with a powerful look at the unexpected aftermath of a high-tech future war, in the sobering "Chitty Bang Bang"; Hugo-winner **Charles Sheffield** leads us on a headlong chase across the solar-system, in a fast-paced adventure where nothing is quite as it seems, as he explains "The Art of Fugue"; artist and author **Michael Carroll**, making his Asimov's debut as a writer (his artwork has appeared here many times before, of course), shuttles us to the Moon to attempt to unravel the cosmic mystery of "The Terrible Lizards of Luna"; and **Rick Wilber** returns with a mysterious and evocative study of art, metaphysics, baseball, and sex, in "Stephen to Cora to Joe, or, The Truth As I Know It, or, Shifty Paradigms: the Use of Literary Icons and Sports Motifs in Speculative Fiction."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column exclaims, "And You Were Worried About Y2K"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, letters, and other features. Look for our June issue on sale on your newsstand on May 2, 2000, or subscribe today (you can now also subscribe electronically, online, at our *Asimov's* Internet website, at *http://www.asimovs.com*), and be sure that you miss none of the great stuff we have coming up for you in the rest of the year!

COMING SOON

great new stories by **Larry Niven**, **Greg Egan**, **Lucius Shepard**, **Kage Baker**, **R. Garcia y Robertson**, **Mike Resnick**, **Robert Reed**, **Lois Tilton**, **Tom Purdom**, **Brian Stableford**, and many others.

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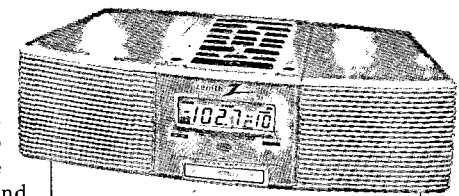

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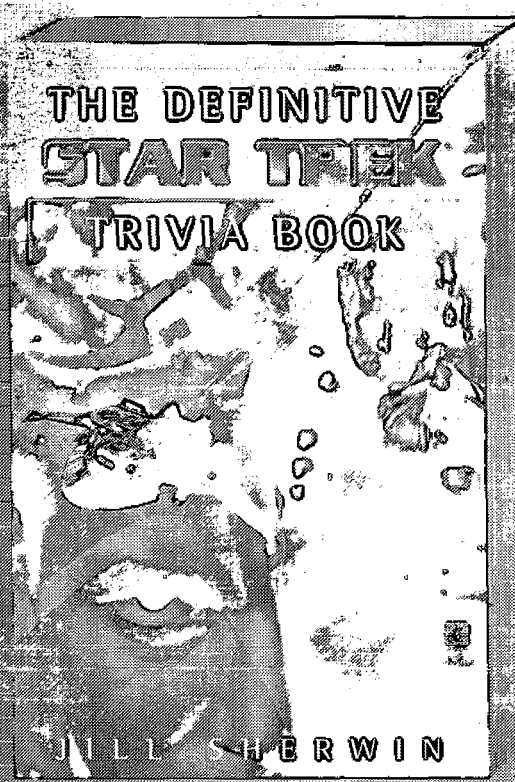

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